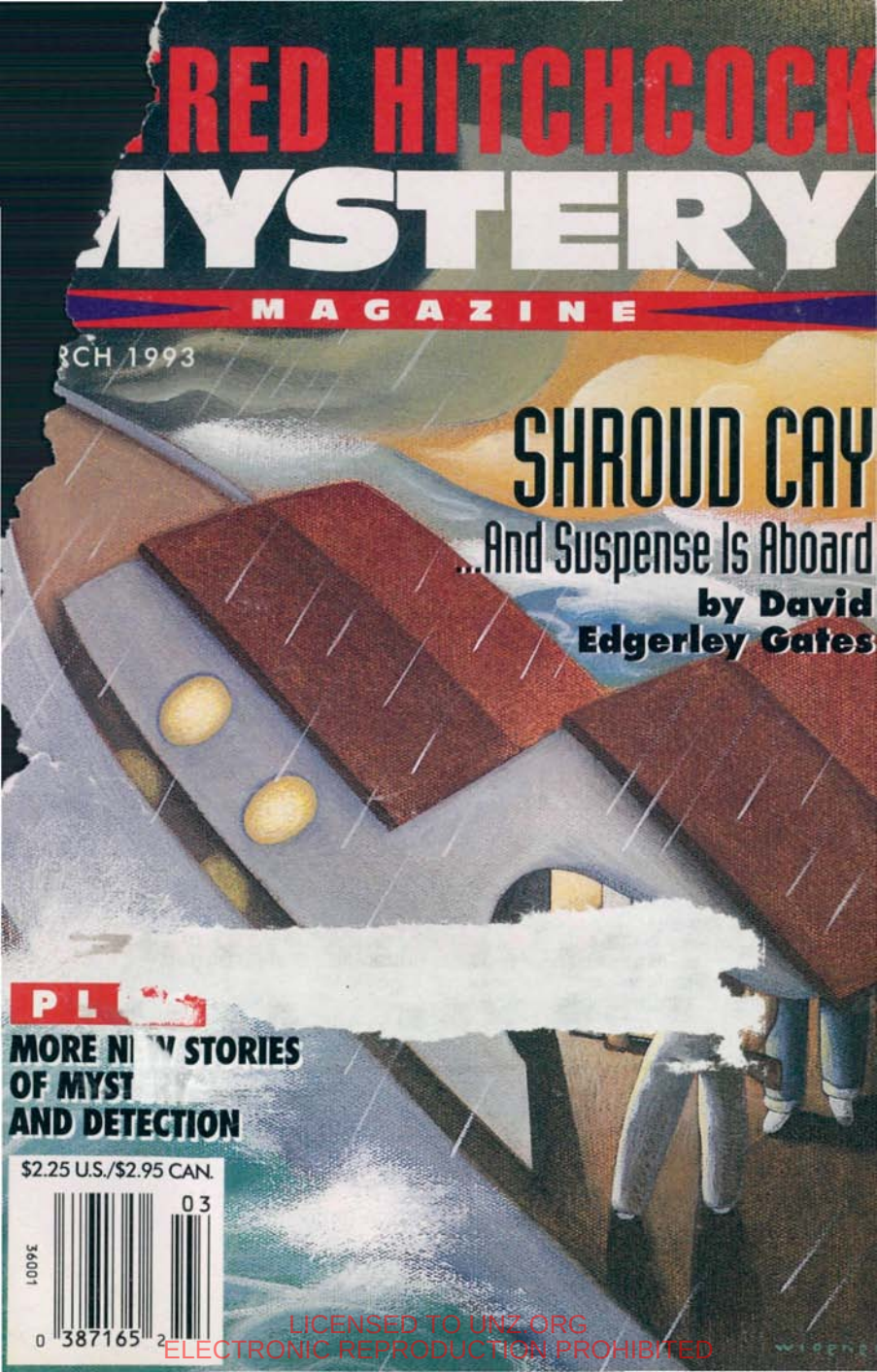


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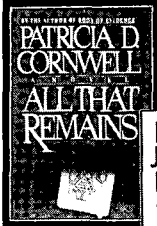
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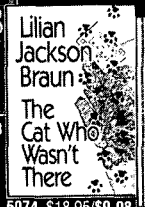
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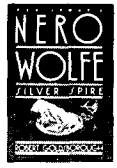
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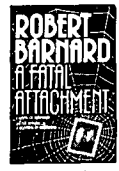
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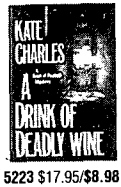
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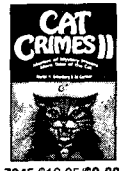
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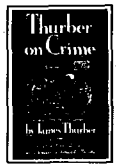
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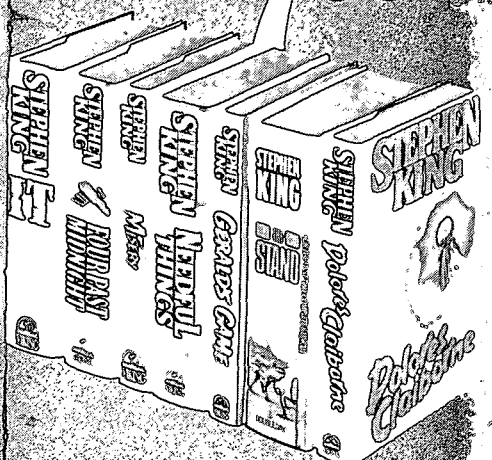
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

We have not properly introduced David Edgerley Gates, author of our cover story, "Shroud Cay," before now, and we don't want to let the opportunity go by. This is Mr. Gates's third story for AHMM, but the keenest eye would only have noticed two. His first tale for this magazine, "Dead Giveaway," was published under the name John Macnab in the February 27, 1980, issue. After a long pause, he returned in October, 1991, with "Inside Straight."

Mr. Gates hails from Massachusetts, says that Cambridge was his hometown, attended Columbia College and Syracuse University, began writing as a freelance movie critic.

We have two first stories in this issue. "The Fourth Man" was written by "Clyde Haywood," a pseudonym for a U.S. judge (U.S. Court of Appeals). We enjoyed "The Fourth Man" a great deal, and concur in the author's comment, "As a prosecutor and as a defense attorney, I heard enough bad fiction about crime from defendants to think I could write some convincingly."

John H. MaGowan, author of "Darker Than Just Before the Dawn," is an independent information systems consultant, formerly with Price Waterhouse, who presently lives in Maryland but who has lived in or visited more than a dozen South American, Central American, and Caribbean countries as well as having lived in a double handful of states in this country. (He says he has visited them all except for Hawaii.)

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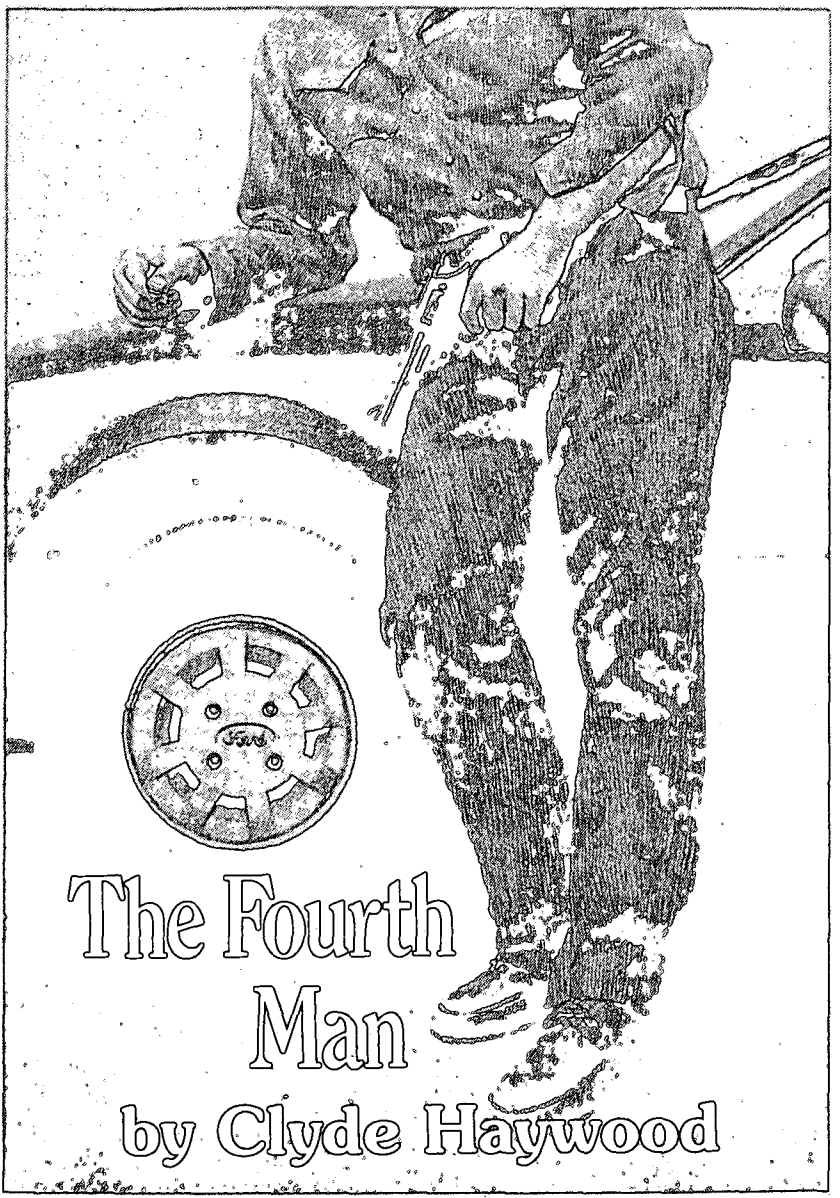
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The Fourth Man

by Clyde Haywood

Illustration by John Johnson

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Sheriff Beale Luther always maintained an open door policy, just as all sheriffs of Gibson County had for as long as he could remember. Nobody had to run a gauntlet of receptionists or even push a buzzer to get in to see him. Anybody could just step directly from the courthouse rotunda into his secretary's office and say, "Need to see the sheriff."

Occasionally she might point to his closed door and say, "He's got somebody with him right now." In that case you could just sit down outside his door and wait until somebody came out because there really was somebody in there. Otherwise his door would be open and you could see for yourself if he was in or out. That's the way sheriffs had been getting themselves reelected in Gibson County for a long, long time. When the sheriff won a hand at the Thursday night poker game, he always dealt the same game next time it was his turn. "I'm not one to kick a winner," he always said. It didn't always work at the poker table, but his method of running the sheriff's office had been keeping him in office for three terms now, and that was the most important thing as far as he could see. So the door was open as usual when Roger Dale Fornby and another man stepped in from the rotunda.

"Need to see the sheriff a few minutes," Roger Dale told the secretary. They could see that the sheriff was in, reading his paper as he did every morning. Roger Dale led the other man over to the open door and tapped on the door jamb.

Luther looked up and beckoned him in. "Come in, Roger Dale," he said. "I'm always pleased to see you."

Sheriff Luther was not above telling a lie if it served his purpose, but this time he was mostly speaking the truth. He was *usually* pleased to see Roger Dale. Roger Dale wasn't like other FBI agents who had come and gone from the little two-man resident agency in the little mountain community. Most of the others were young first or second office agents who didn't have enough seniority to get assigned to an office of preference. They stayed one or two years, and then they got transferred out. Or else they were older agents who had stepped on some coattails somewhere else and been sent to Gibsonville on disciplinary transfer. They stayed until they accumulated enough statistical achievements—what Fornby called "gold stars and attaboys"—to offset their prior transgressions and earn a transfer out to a better office.

Not Roger Dale. Gibsonville was his office of preference. He had come there as a second office agent, one year out of the FBI acad-

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emy. Then he fell in love, first with the town, then with a local girl.

Unlike most agents, he was a native Southerner, although from a very different South down in the flat country near the Gulf Coast. But he loved the hill country where the bureau sometimes sent other men to punish them. He loved the mountain vistas and the plain, traditional ways of the people. He liked the work there, too. Other agents might want to go off to Washington or Atlanta or Chicago to specialize in espionage or embezzlement or organized crime. Not Roger Dale.

He liked working a broad range of usually small violations. He liked the variety. He would rather make a dozen quick arrests than work for months to make one or two big strikes.

He even liked the way the local folks talked, calling him "Roger Dale" just as his delta family had, instead of just "Roger" like a bunch of Yankees.

Because he was happy in Gibson County, and because he was smart and hardworking and understood the people, he came to be good at solving crime there. Because most crime is local and not federal, he often quite by accident came across information that concerned matters outside his own jurisdiction. This he gave to Sheriff Luther. That helped the sheriff keep getting reelected. So the sheriff was usually glad to see him. But not always. This might be one of those other times. Roger Dale had that other agent with him. That agent that came up from the office down in Charlotte just to work the big bank robbery. Luther didn't like him very much. He was an uptight kind of guy. Talked like a Yankee. Roger Dale talked like home folks.

The sheriff got up and met the agents halfway across his little office. Fornby presented his colleague to the sheriff. "You remember Agent Mason, don't you, sheriff? Bob Mason, you've met Sheriff Beale Luther?"

The two men shook hands. "How y'all coming on that B.R.?" the sheriff asked. Ordinarily he would have said "bank robbery," but he had heard FBI agents say "B.R.," and he wanted this guy up from Charlotte to know he wasn't dealing with just any old hick.

"That's what we want to talk to you about if you've got a few minutes," Fornby answered.

"It might be more than just a few minutes," Mason put in.

The sheriff gestured to two straight chairs in front of his desk. They were old and faded, their leather cracking. "Just sit down

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here. I've always got time for somebody that works for my uncle." He chuckled. "My Uncle Sam, you know."

He sat down himself in his roller-footed desk chair and settled into a hollow worn exactly to his shape by years of use. "What have you been able to find out about the B.R.?"

As he asked the question the sheriff leaned over and opened his bottom desk drawer. Mason supposed he was getting a notepad. Fornby knew he was getting nothing. Every sheriff of Gibson County had kept a cuspidor in that drawer since before Roosevelt was president—the first Roosevelt. Luther was just clearing the way so he could spit in it—or near it, at least.

"Well, sheriff," Fornby began, "like I told you three weeks ago right after the bank went down, Agent Mason here is the bank robbery coordinator down in Charlotte, which is the headquarters city. That means he's it for the whole state, so he knows bank robbery. Once he got the details on how they did it, he pretty much knew who did it."

"Yes," Mason put in, "it was a classic robbery. It happened on a Friday. That's payday at two mills within three miles of that bank, and it's the only bank in that part of the county. Because it was the last Friday in the month, it was even payday for the salaried employees and not just the hourly paid. The bank carries extra cash on paydays to cash paychecks and make less-cash deposits. Right after the bank opened, two white males . . ."

Luther chuckled and winked at Fornby. "Them FBI agents down in Charlotte really talk like them reports they write," he said.

Mason smiled a quick, tight-lipped little smile and continued.

"Two white males jumped out of a black Ford with guns already up. They ran into the bank. They ordered everybody onto the floor—jumped the counter—emptied all the drawers. Got some vault cash. Left with over three hundred thousand dollars in less than a minute and a quarter."

Mason paused. Fornby put in, "The bank camera takes a picture every fifteen seconds. That shows us how long they was there. Don't show us much else, though. Pantyhose leg stretched over a man's face sure makes it hard to see what he looks like."

Mason resumed. "Professionals. That's the way to rob a bank. Get in. Get the cash yourself. Get out. Your average amateur, he walks into the bank like he's there to make a deposit. He gets in line. He gets up to the teller. He hands her a note says, 'I've got a gun. Fill this bag with money.'

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"She gives him a few rolls, maybe five, six thousand dollars. One roll has the dye pack in it. He runs out of the bank. Jumps in his own car. The dye pack blows up and his car is full of tear gas and he's got red dye all over his money.

"If that doesn't get him, we've got a stack of full face pictures on the bank camera. No mask, and the tellers eyeballed him for several minutes and they can pick him out of a mug book. Plus which, one of them watched him leave and got his license number and which way he went. And he left the note with his fingerprints on it.

"Not these guys. These guys are pros. They pulled the money themselves. Didn't take a single dye pack. Knew what they were doing. All three people in the bank were facedown on the floor. The manager did raise up and see them leave in the black Ford, but that's all. Of course, the bank is right where the interstate and Highway 236 cross, so they could have gone anywhere."

He paused and the sheriff spoke. "So you don't have much to go on." He spat in the drawer again.This time he hit the cuspidor.

Fornby smiled. "Fortunately, it don't take Bob Mason very much. He can look at a bank robbery and tell who pulled it. Just like you and me can sip a jar of moonshine and tell who made it."

The sheriff frowned. He didn't like anybody, especially a federal agent, suggesting that he tasted moonshine or that he knew who might be making it. Should he deny it?

He didn't have time to. The Yankee agent started talking again. He didn't appear to realize there had been an awkward moment.

"Not always, Roger," he said, smiling modestly. "This time I could, though. This was a pattern robbery. Individual as a fingerprint. There is one gang that always robs a bank just that way. They always hit a rural bank so they don't get caught in traffic; near a crossroads so you don't know which way they went.

"They hit it on payday at a nearby large employer—usually a mill or a mine, so that there's a lot of lowpaid people who cash their checks instead of depositing. That way there's extra cash on hand.

"Each robber jerks on a stocking mask before they go in. Jerks it off when they drive away so they don't get spotted going down the road with masks on.

"They do everything else just like this robbery so as not to get dye packs or leave good pictures. This had to be the Kelly-McGee gang."

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The sheriff jumped out of his chair. "Kelly-McGee," he shouted. "The fellows who busted out of the prison camp were . . ."

"That's right," Fornby interrupted, "Jack Kelly and Colin McGee. They were the leaders of the gang. The FBI had asked the Department of Justice not to turn them over to the state, especially since they had busted prison before in another state or two. But the higher-ups figured since those two owed North Carolina more than they owed the feds we ought to let y'all have them first. Probably wouldn't have thought that way if they could have known that Central Prison would get so crowded that they'd send them out to a road camp.

"Anyway, when Bob saw the pattern of this robbery, he knew who he was looking for."

The sheriff, who had sat back down, jumped up again. "What are we waiting for? Let's put out an A.P.B."

Fornby motioned the sheriff back to his chair. "You done that when they escaped, Beale. Besides, we ain't done yet. Go ahead, Bob."

Mason continued. "The Kelly-McGee gang always uses a stolen car so it doesn't trace to them. And they always steal a Ford. Seems they think Fords are dependable and easy to operate and they don't stand out in the memories of people they pass like a more exotic model might."

"Well, damn it," said the sheriff, "the branch manager—that's my cousin Dwight Beale—raised up and seen them leave in a Ford. Let's get working."

"Sheriff," said Fornby, "you know we've been working."

Of course he knew they had. You couldn't be moving around in Gibson County and the sheriff not know it. But he didn't like the edge in Fornby's voice, and he didn't like the slow pace with which this story was unfolding.

"If we know who we're looking for, why ain't we out looking?" he asked impatiently.

"Because we need to figure out how many we're looking for," Fornby answered.

Mason nodded agreement and resumed the narration. "We knew at least one and probably two others were involved. First, they needed a wheel man at the bank. These are careful bank robbers. They don't take any chances on the getaway car not starting. And they sure don't leave it running without a driver under the wheel. We had a lone bank robber try that in Greensboro one time, and

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somebody stole his car while he was inside robbing the bank. These guys had a wheel man.

"Plus which, these guys use a switch car. They always steal two Fords, not just one. That way, if anybody did get a description of the getaway car on the radio, the bad guys are driving one that doesn't match it by the time the police start looking for it. Usually they leave a second wheel man with the switch car. He's got the motor running and ready to go when they get to the switch point with the first car.

"So we know there had to be one other man. We figure there were two. Besides, somebody had to help them escape. Somebody had to case the bank job for them. They just busted out two days before the robbery. They weren't from around here. How would they know about this bank location and the mill payday? How would they even find cars to steal?"

Mason paused as if he expected an answer to his rhetorical questions. Fornby took up the tale.

"When Bob started talking to me about that last part, especially that part about the two Fords, I figured it was time for me to go to work. I checked with the computer down in Raleigh for recently stolen Fords in this area. There was just three. One of them was a light-colored Thunderbird. These boys use cars that don't stand out in a crowd. That left just two. A black Ford somebody snatched from outside the Legion Hut two nights before the robbery, and a blue one right down the road from there the next night—robbery eve, you might say.

"Then I got to thinking about this escape. Sheriff, you know how they got out?"

The sheriff nodded. "Yeah. Got two pistols from somewhere and threw down on two new guards. Took their uniforms and walked right out the door like as if they were somebody."

"Right," Fornby responded. "And they couldn't have done that if they hadn't known the right security responses at the gate. So Bob and me put two and two together. We checked with the state personnel folks and found out that there was one guard over at that unit that had quit just the day before they broke out. A boy named Owens. Justin Owens.

"We figure they might have worked the whole thing out with him. He was leaving the job anyway. Was a probationary employee. Hadn't worked out. So they hid the guns till he'd been gone a day to throw off suspicion."

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"I know the Owens boy," the sheriff put in. "He's not from around here."

"Yeah, we heard you did," Fornby said. "Heard he helped out some in your campaign just before he got that job with the prison."

The sheriff swallowed. Then choked as the tobacco juice ran down his throat. After a short coughing spell, he composed himself. "I don't remember nothing about that, Roger Dale. Lot of folks worked in my campaign. I just remember that Owens boy hanging around the Legion Hut. Ain't that where you said they stole them Fords?"

"Yeah," Fornby responded. "Reckon he could tell them where and they could tell him how."

The sheriff wiped a trace of tobacco juice off his jaw and shook his head sadly. "Sure do hate to hear about somebody that's been in law enforcement going bad. Easy to understand, though. You spend your whole life working for peanuts and some crook comes along with a chance to make some money . . ." His voice trailed off like a schoolboy's does when he realizes that the teacher is standing behind him while he's telling a dirty joke.

Roger stared levelly at the sheriff. "He didn't spend his life in law enforcement. He was a prison guard a few months. Or were you thinking of somebody else?"

Sheriff Luther shrugged. "Whatever. Anyway," he said, rising from his chair, "we'd better get an A.P.B. out on that Owens boy."

Roger motioned him down again. "We ain't quite through telling you about it yet. After me and Bob had figured it out about the guard and where the cars came from, Bob explained to me all about how Kelly and McGee use their switch cars. We knew that stolen black Ford had to be somewhere not too far from the bank. But nobody had spotted it. So we had people drive every road anywhere near there. Nothing. We got the D.E.A. boys to fly their marijuana plane. Still nothing.

"So I got to thinking, and what I thought of was that there's an awful lot of thick woods around there, thick enough to hide a Ford, even from the air—especially a black Ford. We don't have enough manpower to really search those woods. Even within just ten miles of the bank you're talking maybe a hundred square miles of wooded mountain land. We got about a hundred and fifty agents in this whole dang state, and most of them would get lost if they got out of sight of the highway. If they didn't get lost, they would fall down a ditch bank and break their necks."

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The sheriff rocked forward like he'd just heard something exciting. "I'll find that Ford for you," he sputtered. "Some of my boys know these woods around here like a bee knows a honeycomb."

Fornby again motioned him back. "We found it," he said.

The sheriff's eyes widened. "How?" he asked. "I mean, if you didn't have no men for the job."

Fornby winked. "I figured out a way. You know Adam Caufield?"

"Sure, the A.T.F. agent," the sheriff answered.

Fornby nodded. "Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. But he's kept his hand in. He knows everybody in this county that ever made moonshine."

That was twice Roger Dale had made that kind of crack. The sheriff wasn't going to let it pass again. "Nobody gets by with making moonshine in my county," he insisted. Both the sheriff and Roger Dale knew that what he really meant was nobody got by with it if the sheriff caught them doing it. If somebody supported the sheriff's reelection campaign with a large enough contribution, he wasn't likely to catch them doing it.

Fornby shrugged off the interruption. "Anyway," he continued, "Adam owes me some favors, and he got hold of fourteen or fifteen people in that part of the county that he thought might be making moonshine, and he told them that we were planning on putting two hundred agents to searching through the woods around there looking for a black Ford. You know it wasn't but one day before one of them fellows had found that car? They may not have been making moonshine, but they sure didn't want two hundred federal agents prowling around in those woods."

The sheriff laughed—not one of his usual hearty, bellyshaking laughs—but a little high nervous laugh, like a fellow who's making time to think before he answers his wife's question concerning the lipstick on his shirt. "They're just hunters," he decided at last. "Didn't want a bunch of flatlanders stomping around scaring game." He crammed a new chew of tobacco into his cheek.

Roger stared at him in silence for a long minute, then asked, "Don't you want to know where they found it."

Luther spat. "I figured you were fixing to tell me."

Fornby did. "You know those piney woods over between the bank and the county line? Seems there's an old farm road that runs up through them off one of those county roads that come into 236, down by what they call Beale's Creek, after your mama's people.

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The old farmhouse is gone. Just part of the chimney is still standing. You can't tell any of it is there from the road, but if you drive through a break in the ditch bank and up into the woods, it's still passable, and there's a wide place up by the chimney where they could leave the switch car while they pulled the robbery. Adam's friends took us to the one Ford there, and we found tracks that our lab boys matched with some from where the other Ford was stolen. That's where they made the switch all right."

The sheriff leaned forward again. "So I guess that Owens boy showed them a real good place to hide a Ford," he said.

Fornby nodded. "That's what Bob thought. But I got to wondering. Like you said, he ain't from around here. I been here ten or eleven years, and Adam Cauffield's been here twenty. Neither one of us knew about that old farmplace. How did Owens know about it? He don't hunt or nothing, and anyway, that land's posted. I don't think anybody much knows what's in that patch of piney woods but the fellow that's paying taxes on it."

He fell silent and left those words hanging in the air like woodsmoke. It stayed silent until the sheriff finally spoke. "Reckon you checked on who that was." He looked at Fornby.

Fornby nodded, but he still didn't say anything.

The sheriff looked at Mason. Mason didn't seem to be paying much attention. He had taken out his handkerchief and was cleaning his glasses. The sheriff took out his handkerchief, too, and wiped some sweat off his forehead. Finally he spoke again.

"Just because a fellow inherits some land and pays taxes on it don't mean he goes out to it much."

"No," Roger agreed. "Don't reckon it does." Then he fell silent again.

After several more seconds that seemed to the sheriff to be at least minutes, he finally asked, "Don't reckon you found any prints on that car—them bank robbers being so smart and all?"

"Nope," Roger allowed. "Not one print."

"So I guess you fellows weren't really a whole lot better off than you were before you found that Ford."

"Well, I wouldn't have been," Roger answered, "but old Bob was." He pointed to Mason, who still didn't seem to be very involved. He had put his glasses back on, but he had started shining his tie clip—a gold bar with the round seal of the FBI on it.

Roger went on. "See, old Bob knows these Kelly-McGee boys so well he knew what they would have done next. He knew that when

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they leave the getaway car and take off in the switch car it's never more than five or six miles before they ditch that one. And it's always away from that bank. So we had a right small area where we could look for that other Ford. Well, old Adam rounded me up some more moonshiners . . ." Roger paused.

That time the sheriff didn't bother to argue.

Roger went on. "But, you know, they looked for days and they haven't ever found that car."

The sheriff didn't look surprised. "I reckon you fellows are kind of back up against a stone wall then, ain't you?" He started to get up. "I'll put out that A.P.B. on the Owens boy."

"I don't think so, sheriff," Roger told him. "After them friends of Cauffield's couldn't find that car, me and old Bob kind of put our heads together. He was sure that Kelly and McGee wouldn't break pattern. He knew they would get out of that second stolen car just as soon as they got clean away from where anybody could possibly have seen them in the first one. And once they got rid of it, they weren't going to let anybody connected with them be out driving it around. But he couldn't remember anything they had ever done that would give him a clue as to where they might have put it.

"So I got to thinking. If there wasn't anything about them that could say where that car was, then maybe there was something about one of the other guys. Now, Owens wasn't from around here, so I thought more about that fourth man that we figured had to be there to drive that other car, and know about that old farmplace on Beale's Creek. Somebody from around here, and somebody kind of smart that would figure out a place to hide a car real good and hide it real fast. So we knew something about him now, but we didn't know who he was."

The sheriff eased back a little. "You didn't know who he was, huh?"

Roger shook his head. "No, but old Bob has been chasing bank robbers so long that he said we could figure out what that fellow would do anyway. He figured that a fellow like that, being kind of smart, would be looking for a place where nobody would find that car for a long time. So I figured that the fellow being from around here might know some kind of place where a car had been hidden for a long, long time before this. So I told him that old story I've heard you tell about that bootlegger that shot his partner and pushed his Packard with him in it into that old quarry back of the brushy mountains.

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"Then he ran off with his partner's widow, and ten years later she fell out with him and told the law about it. Whoever was sheriff then sent divers out, and they raised the Packard with what was left of the body in it. Well, you know there's a quarry full of water just about like that one just about six miles from where we found that first Ford."

The sheriff stood all the way up. "Well, damn, boys. Let's get some divers out and go look for that other Ford."

He looked at Mason. The quiet agent had put his tie clip back on and was polishing his service revolver. He had the cylinder out so it was perfectly safe, but for some reason the sheriff seemed very nervous anyway. Fornby didn't bother to motion this time, he just started talking and the sheriff sat down.

"We already did that," Fornby said. "We found that Ford, too, late one night with out of town help, which is why you probably haven't heard about it. And inside that Ford we found Kelly and McGee and the Owens boy. Every one of them had been shot before that car was sunk."

"Well, I guess that wraps it up," the sheriff said. "They got to fighting over the loot and shot one another while the car was going, and it ran into the quarry. Reckon there was no fourth man after all." His voice sounded a little firmer again, like a preacher who had lost his place in his notes but now he's back on line.

Roger shook his head. "That ain't the way we figure it. We figure that the fourth man, being kind of smart, and being local and all, wasn't satisfied to risk everything for a quarter of that bank loot and wasn't comfortable with three crooks out there that could blow the whistle. We figure he's got all the loot, and no witnesses left."

The sheriff stared at him—levelly, coolly, like some old gunfighter measuring a challenger in an old Western movie. "How do you plan to prove that?" he asked at last.

"For starters," Roger replied, "there was no loot in the car."

The sheriff was unimpressed. "It could have fallen out," he said.

"Reckon it could have," Roger answered, "but there was another thing."

Before Roger could name that thing, the sheriff jumped up and interrupted him with, "Wait a minute. Mrs. Taylor just came into the office." He gestured toward a tall, greyhaired lady walking past the secretary's desk. "She's the clerk of court, and that's a real important office. I better go see what she wants." He bustled around his desk and towards the door.

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Mason, still holding the opened revolver in his left hand, caught the sheriff with his right.

"That's okay," he told the sheriff. "She's coming this way, and she might want to hear the rest of this story. It's very interesting."

Roger motioned Mrs. Taylor in. The sheriff made a great show of introductions, although Roger had known Mrs. Taylor about as long as he had known the sheriff, and she and Bob had greeted each other by name when she came in. Mason gave her his chair and leaned against the wall, still polishing the open cylinder of his pistol.

Roger continued. "The other thing is that according to ballistics Kelly and McGee were both shot with a pistol we found in the Owens boy's lap, but the slug in Owens didn't match either one of the other pistols we found in that Ford."

"It fell out," the sheriff injected. "Just like the money did. There was another gun, and it fell out. And you won't ever find something as small as a pistol in a quarry full of water. Owens shot them two bank robbers and one of them shot Owens, as he was dying. And then the gun and the money fell out. I bet half the windows was broke out of that car, what with all the shooting and falling in the quarry. It and the money fell out."

Roger nodded. "Yeah. The windows were busted, all right. But we don't think it happened that way. We think Owens and the fourth man got the drop on the other two and Owens shot them, thinking him and the fourth man was working together, and the fourth man dropped him. Our forensic medical people say that all three of them were dead when they hit the water. Not a drop in their lungs. Now, that ain't likely if they were still fighting when they rolled over.

"No, them fellows didn't all kill each other. A fourth man killed one of them. A kind of smart fellow from around here that knew where the farm road was and knew how to hide a car."

The sheriff spat in his drawer and stood up, brushing his hands against each other like a man does when he wants folks to know he has something better to do. "If that's all you know about him," he said, "then you won't never make a case." He took a step around the side of his desk.

"We know a little more," Mason said quietly.

The sheriff stopped where he stood. "How's that?" he asked.

Mason took up the tale. "The B.R. gang did a good job of policing up the area where they switched cars, but we found one wad of chewing tobacco out there."

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The sheriff almost swallowed his own wad. "That could have been put there any time," he fumed.

"Not this wad," Mason said. "It was under the tire of the black Ford where it crossed a track of the switch car. Lab boys said only one car ran over it. It had to have been put there after the switch car went in and before the black Ford. The fourth man must have spit it out when he saw the others coming."

With that, the sheriff spat again. "Lots of men around here chew tobacco." He spat the words as he had the amber juice.

"Not all of them have B positive blood," Mason answered. "Lab people say there's enough saliva left in the wad to determine that the chewer was what they call a secretor—his body fluids show his blood type. He was B positive."

The sheriff said nothing. Fornby did. "You know, sheriff, type B positive is fairly rare. You remember you and me were the only ones that showed up when the Red Cross called for it that Christmas."

The sheriff braced his hands palms down on his desk and stared back and forth between the two men. Roger was looking straight back at him as calm as a real good poker player. Mason was studying his pistol, picking at a speck of discoloration on the otherwise shining barrel.

Sheriff Luther didn't want to look at Mrs. Taylor, but he stole a glance. She was staring at the floor, looking embarrassed, as if some man she halfway knew was undressing in front of her and she didn't want to watch.

After several seconds of silence, Beale finally spoke. "I still don't see how you could convict anybody on that. He's probably from around here, he chews tobacco, and he's got type B blood. I'm not a lawyer, and I could whip you on that. There's got to be dozens, maybe hundreds of men like that."

Roger nodded. "That's what we figured, too, sheriff. Unless we could somehow tie the fourth man to the gun that killed Justin Owens, we wouldn't have a chance."

"And you never recovered the gun," Beale said. "It's at the bottom of the quarry."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Roger answered. "We didn't find it, but our ballistics people can tell us a whole lot about it. They looked at the two chunks of lead that came out of Owens—fellow shot him twice, trying to be sure, I guess. And they studied what they call the 'lands and grooves,' and they could tell us that it was

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a .45 Smith and Wesson that killed that boy. Now, how about that?"

Sheriff Beale spat out another wad of tobacco. "Real interesting, Roger Dale. But I don't see how that gets you anywhere."

Fornby chuckled. "It wouldn't have got me very far if it hadn't been for old Bob." He gestured towards the other agent, who was again examining the open cylinder, chocking bullets into it one by one.

"Old Bob is always thinking. He's a lawyer, you know. Don't say much about that. Don't know if he's modest or just ashamed. Anyway, he's always thinking, and he knows about a lot of stuff. He knew that our ballistic lab people up in Washington keep all the charts and pictures on every gun that they examine. Keep them forever. And he had this idea—I never would have thought of it—but he had this idea of having them compare that lead out of Owens with any other .45 Smith and Wesson they had examined out of this part of North Carolina. And they did. And would you believe they came up with a match."

Fornby paused. No one else spoke. He went on. "They got a match with what we call a 'local adoption' case. That's where a case starts out federal, so our lab does the ballistics, but later it turns into a local case, so our boys come down and testify in state court. Seems this gun was first tested in a B.R. case, but the same guy had used the same gun to kill a man here in Gibson County. So they introduced the gun and our lab findings in your court."

He paused again. Again no one spoke. Sheriff Luther and Mrs. Taylor continued to look down. They all heard Mason give his cylinder a fast spin and then click it back into the frame of his revolver. In the silence of the tiny office it sounded as loud as a jail door slamming. No one had to look up to know exactly where the revolver was pointing.

Roger went on. "Well, old Bob, him being a lawyer and all, he did some checking on North Carolina law and what he calls 'local practice,' and he found out that when an exhibit is introduced into evidence, it right then goes into the custody of the clerk of court. And if it's a firearm, it stays there unless a Superior Court judge orders it released or destroyed.

"Well, naturally we went to Mrs. Taylor here and asked her about the old firearms she had. And she told us that when she took over as clerk two years ago she was kind of worried about all those guns, 'cause it don't seem like anybody ever asks a Superior Court

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judge to sign one of those orders in Gibson County. So she put a new padlock on the closet where all those guns were, and she had just two keys made—one for her and one for another real important public official. Only she didn't tell him that she keeps a running inventory and checks on them guns after every time he goes into the closet. And do you know that one day a few weeks back he went into that closet. And would you believe that after he left she checked and found out that the .45 Smith and Wesson that we're looking for was gone, and it hasn't turned up yet?"

The sheriff did not answer. Roger went on.

"Old Bob, he found out something else about North Carolina law. Since the law makes the sheriff the chief process serving officer, there had to be something in the law that says who can serve the warrant if the sheriff has to be arrested in his own county. Do you know that the clerk of court is the only person who can arrest the sheriff on state charges in his own county? Mrs. Taylor."

She spoke for the first time since the introductions. "Sheriff Beale Luther, by the power invested in me as Clerk of the Superior Court, I arrest you in the name of the State of North Carolina for the murder of Justin Owens, Jack Kelly, and Colin McGee."

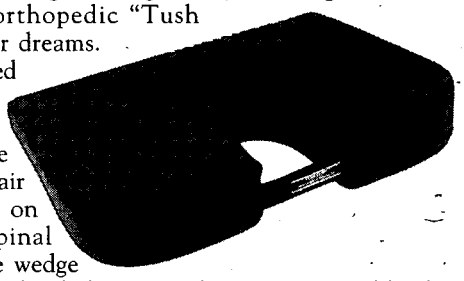
Mason handed Fornby a pair of handcuffs. Fornby clicked them around Sheriff Luther's wrists. " 'Course we don't need the clerk on the federal bank robbery charges."

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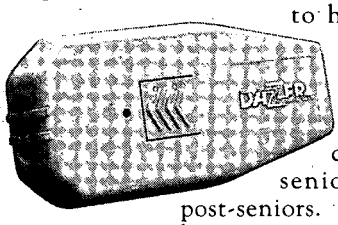
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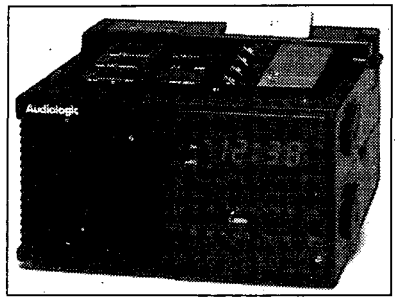


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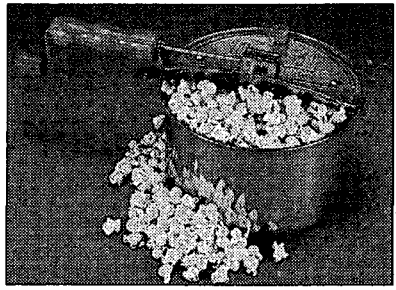
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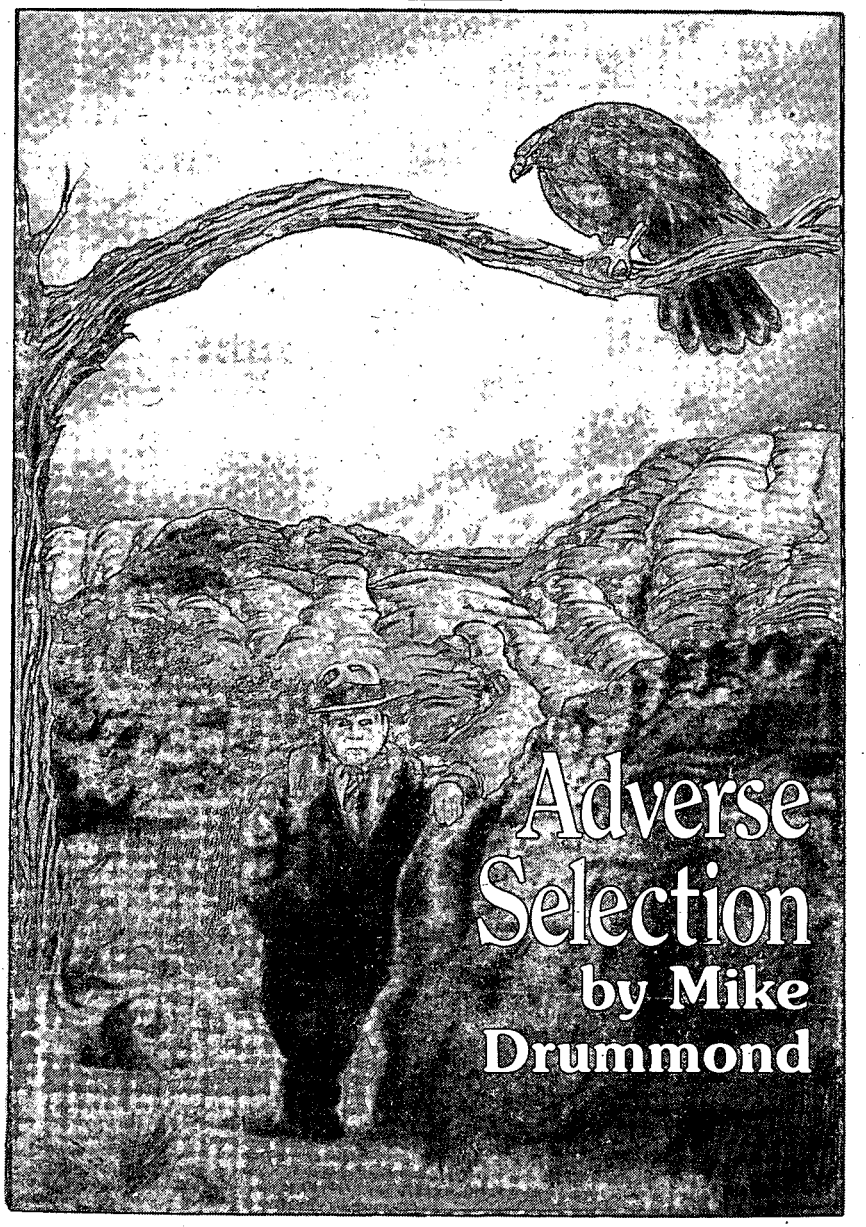
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Adverse Selection

by Mike Drummond

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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Mike Ajanian's son-in-law was dead, murdered. It was my job to find out why. Otherwise there was no way I would have been out in the woods perched on a slippery rock trying to warm my hands with a mug of cocoa, tiny marshmallows floating in it and all.

I was interviewing Ross McWire, a nonstop talker who looked like he got all his clothes from one of those expensive New England plaid-woolie-and-waders mail order houses. He owned the rock I was standing on, and quite a few more. The cocoa and the marshmallows were his idea of a chic breakfast.

"Call it morbid curiosity if you want," my host continued. "I detoured from my usual morning route around the lake and crashed through the chaparral over there to see what all the buzzards were after."

My eye followed McWire's manicured fingertip to a point on the far side of the lake. Pine trees stretched upward toward a Sierra Nevada horizon ending in distant snowcapped peaks.

"Judging by their numbers," he continued, "whatever it was had to be big or the first bird would have polished it off. I figured a deer, maybe brought down by coyotes and abandoned, or more likely shot by some lazy hunter who was more interested in a moving target than he was in a venison dinner. Only a month before, a pregnant doe collapsed by the edge of the creek. She looked like a pincushion peppered with arrow shafts. Damned bow hunters—haven't the foggiest idea how to make a clean kill. Don't get me started on hunters, Mr. Bristowe . . . "

It was a probing cause, to see which side of the "hunting issue" I was going to take. McWire probably had a twenty minute canned speech ready for me, but I wasn't rising to the bait. I prefer to remain neutral unless I get paid to take sides. I smiled and shrugged my shoulders, hoping he would continue his story. When he saw I wasn't going to cooperate, he did just that.

"She was jammed in the rocks—not the doe, of course—the woman. Late twenties, early thirties, it was hard to say. I'd never seen her before. She wasn't from Del Oro, and she wasn't exactly dressed for the great outdoors. One of those plunging neckline one-piece bathing suits with a pair of shorts over that, and one sandal. Gold bracelet and earrings, and an incredibly large cocktail ring on her right hand. She'd ruined her manicure clawing

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her way up the rocks.

"Oh, and her arms and legs and face were covered with long shallow scratches from the berry bushes. If she had lived, she would have had one hell of a case of poison oak. But of course the bullet hole in her lower back had taken her beyond that. She hadn't been worrying about anything for several days. Bled to death right there within sight of my cabin."

He was reliving the whole discovery process while he stared at some unmarked spot about thirty feet up from the lake.

"The buzzards perched brazenly in the oak snags above, their slick skulls and razor-sharp beaks waiting for an opportunity to rip into her flesh again. I tossed a stone at the nearest one, but he didn't take flight. Then I snapped off some manzanita boughs and covered her with a protective canopy of dry brush and twigs before I headed for town to see Sheriff Wyler."

"Thank you, Mr. McWire," I said. "You've given me a truly vivid account."

"No problem. You know I never did see the other body. Rumor is it was more grisly than the girl."

"That's what they say."

"Is that enough, Mr. Bristowe? I've got to get into the office. Things have been hectic the last three months."

"I thought you said you were retired."

"I am, but some of my old clients haven't gotten the message. I'm in most mornings, fielding calls."

"What's your line?"

"Insurance, annuities. Mostly variable or deferred. Nest egg stuff."

I could tell McWire was shifting into selling mode, so I nipped that in the bud.

"My sister's old man is taking care of my assets," I lied, handing him my sticky mug. "Thanks again."

As I bucked and bumped my way back to Del Oro on narrow gravel roads, I marveled at the number of adjectives and adverbs McWire used. The guy sounded more like an English professor than the usual insurance hack. "Brazen buzzards," for example—that wasn't going to appear in my report unless Ajanian started paying me by the word.

Mike Ajanian is a piece of work. He owns or controls most of the garbage in certain areas of central California. Bear Trucking is his. His first name is actually Mischa, which I understand means "bear" in the old country lingo. The son of poor immigrants, he can buy and sell just about anyone in

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the state and will do absolutely anything to ensure happiness for his darling daughter Aurora. Which was why I was out scraping the bottom off my convertible on those hick roads. Aurora Ajanian was married to the deceased. No, not to the dead girl. The body McWire found belonged to Linda Hayes, former legislative aide to one Charles Dimmich, the state insurance commissioner. Or more accurately, the *late* state insurance commissioner. The two of them are late together . . . forever.

Ajanian made it very much worth my while to get this case wrapped up ASAP, something the local lawmen had been unable to do on their own in the weeks since the event. I was on my way to light a fire under one of them.

I bypassed the brick sheriff's office and went directly to where McWire told me he held court each morning. Sheriff Wyler was in the back booth at Dagmar's Donuts packing away a training table-sized breakfast and washing it down with a pot of high octane. The eight ounce coffee mug looked like a demitasse in his huge hand. He had a salt and pepper mustache that hid a jagged scar on his upper lip. I identified myself and slid in opposite him. "Circus in town?" he growled.

I let the remark pass. I almost always do. At four foot three, remarks like that go right over my head. Besides, I had been in the circus once, as a clown and acrobat. Just long enough for a taste, though; there is no sawdust in my veins. I was younger then, more adventuresome. Squandered another year on the road as a special "bodyguard" for the rock group Valhalvah. What I started putting in my veins with them took me off the road for good. If you live, you learn. Ancient history by now. A different story entirely.

"About Dimmich," I said.

"Do I owe you the time of day?" he asked.

The way he said it wasn't really a question, more like a threat. But big guys don't scare me often. Heck, if they did, I'd be terrified of everyone who has the good fortune to be able to glance downward to find a light switch on the wall. Wyler watched me, waiting for me to bolt like a scared rabbit. When I didn't budge, he glared for awhile.

"Don't get short with me," I said.

After a moment Wyler's eyes changed, softened maybe, lost their edge for sure.

"I'm checking things out for

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his family," I continued. "I'm not out to second guess you or step on anyone's toes."

"Don't know if I believe all that," he said, "but I'll give you ten minutes. Probably nothing you don't already know."

Sheriff Wyler ordered another pot of coffee from a passing waitress and began his tale.

"Wada's tow truck was already at McWire's when I got there."

"Who?"

"Yosh Wada is the county coroner, doubles as a towing service to make ends meet. Most of his business, one way or the other, comes from accidents out on the interstate going over toward Reno.

"The only tracks around the isolated lake were McWire's, which is understandable since he has the only cabin there and he lives alone. Most of the land for miles around is national forest, remote and wild. He didn't remember hearing any shots, claimed he tunes out gunfire, what with the way sound travels out here. Noise could have been target plinkers or hunters twenty miles away. So anyway, McWire found the girl . . . "

"Linda Hayes, a legislative aide," I said.

"Right. Hayes couldn't have traveled more than a mile or so with a wound like that. It was like she dropped out of the sky. Which it turns out she did, sort of.

"There is a long narrow lake and some great fishing just over the ridge behind McWire's. Used to be pretty famous—Delpano Shores—until the lodge burned down in '73. Now the old access road is overgrown so it's only reachable on foot. But the girl didn't look like she'd ever hiked more than a few yards in her life."

"Dimmich flew her in."

"Whose story is this, Bristowe!" Wyler growled. "Yeah, in a seaplane. We found it cut loose and drifted to the downwind side of the lake."

"And Dimmich?"

"Dead on the beach near a campfire."

"My sources say he was tied to a tree and used for target practice."

Sheriff Wyler set his cup down and gave me the stare.

"Your sources better not be on my payroll, Bristowe."

"So you don't deny it?"

"Look, squirt, are you telling me or asking me? Sounds like you already read my report, or were there when it happened. Why are you spoiling my breakfast?"

"As I said, sheriff, I have sources, and from your reaction, they appear to be accurate. As to my being there, I'd rather spend a day being 'it' in

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a drunken game of dwarf-tossing before I'd work up a sweat hiking around these forsaken boondocks. What sort of arrows were used, and did the same gun kill Hayes and Dimmich?"

"If you know about the arrows, you know they were removed by the murderer. Appeared to be six-bladed hunting broadheads. Wada extracted a .320 slug from the girl, but the bullet passed straight through Dimmich's abdomen. We searched the area. No trace, probably somewhere at the bottom of the lake."

"I understand there weren't any footprints, either."

"Hardly a mystery there. You've been out to McWire's, both lakes are about the same. Broad granite slabs right to the water's edge, the rest is loose rock. And before you ask it, the murderer didn't carve his or her name in a tree trunk for me."

"That was my next question."

I got back a real paved road and headed downhill to Sacramento. The Wyler interview left me both drained and unenlightened. I didn't know what bothered me most, that or the sickening sweetness that still clung to my teeth from McWire's marshmallows.

A few blocks west of the capitol building, rows of massive boxlike apartment buildings lined the avenue. It was a neighborhood where Linda Hayes and hundreds of other mover-and-shaker wannabes hung their spare clothes and dreams.

I had an hour to kill before a five thirty appointment with Carol Hart, Linda's roommate and co-worker. I spent it on a bench in the shade of a giant oak watching squirrels cavort near the capitol steps. That is the way nature is meant to be observed, comfortably at a distance, from the sidewalk.

Carol Hart was in when I rang. From the looks of her, she was always in. She was a drab one, carrying about fifteen pounds too much weight, no makeup, and straight shoulder-length hair. A tiny gold crucifix flickered from the chain at her throat. Her eyes were intelligent, and she wore a perpetual frown. A real load of laughs.

The decor in her apartment suited her perfectly. The place was as stark as a bootcamp barracks, all greys and pale greens. Nothing that I'd call the feminine touch. A personal computer, fax machine, and beeper sat in one corner. *Plane & Pilot* and a number of other aviation-related items provided the only color on the coffee table.

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To Carol's credit, she brewed a mean cup of tea. We conducted the interview on a small balcony overlooking the evening rush hour traffic. When she looked down at it, she had one of those smug "if you lived here, you'd be home already" looks on her face.

There was another look, too, quizzical. You'd be surprised how many women get that look when they're trying to imagine me in bed with them—not that Ms. Hart had those thoughts.

"How do you tail someone?" she asked. "I mean, a person of your stature . . . "

"Standing head and shoulders below the crowd as I do?" I smiled. "My work rarely involves a tail, Ms. Hart. I'm not the cloak and dagger type."

That shot the wad on small talk. Ms. Hart was drawing a blank and fidgeting in her chair. I picked up the slack.

"From the looks of things, you lead a busy life," I said, nodding toward the beeper on the table.

"Taking work home and being 'on call' are part of the job. Mr. Dimmich was constantly calling us from somewhere on his cellular phone. Especially since the Exceptional Life acquisition bidding war heated up."

"I see."

Carol Hart poured herself a second cup of tea with precise, economical moves. She was probably a perfectionist at work.

"Quite a scandal," I said, referring to the insurance company fiasco, but her answer went in another direction.

"We all saw it coming, Mr. Bristowe. Oh, not the murders exactly, but something. The whole office suspected they were carrying on, knew something was going to happen up at that lake in the mountains."

"Delpano Shores?"

"Yes. I think so. Anyway, he couldn't get away with behavior like that forever, even if he was insurance commissioner and God's gift to women."

"Charles Dimmich fooled around a lot?"

"What do you think? He was a man after all."

"So he and Ms. Hayes were . . . "

She nodded vigorously. "And not the first, I might add."

"You?" I asked.

"Certainly not! Although at one time or other he made lewd remarks to each of us, patted Becky on her . . . her bottom, right there in the conference room."

"Unseemly behavior, I'm sure, but not quite grounds for murder, would you say? Did he and Ms. Hayes spend any 'quality time' here?"

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"Not during the week, but I spend most weekends with Mother in Lodi so I'm sure they must have taken advantage of my absence. What did his wife think he was doing anyway, away from home so much?"

"I'm sure I can't say, Ms. Hart. I noticed some aviation magazines inside. Are they yours?"

Carol Hart lost her frown for the briefest moment.

"Yes, it's a passion of mine. I've flown since I was twelve. Lodi's farm country, and Dad had a cropduster. Two of my brothers are commercial pilots. I have a multiengine rating myself, not that I get much use out of it."

"It can be an expensive hobby. Did Ms. Hayes fly, too?" I doubted that she did. From the looks of the place, the late Linda Hayes used the apartment as a changing room and not much else.

"Only as a passenger," Carol said. "Linda talked me into flying her to Mammoth once, but I've never been much of a skier and I don't mingle well."

"Ever fly anywhere with the two of them?"

"Once, on a business trip to San Francisco, in one of Mr. Dimmich's planes. I didn't approve of his technique."

"In flying?"

"There is a saying, Mr. Bristowe. There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots."

"Meaning Dimmich took risks he didn't have to take?"

"And not just in the air."

"Is it safe to say you didn't approve of Linda's affair with Dimmich?"

"What do you think? It was immoral on every level. He's a married man, and he didn't love her. Look at the way he treated the other women. What was she thinking about, Mr. Bristowe?"

Either her raging hormones or her career, I thought.

"God help her" was what I said.

"I pray She does, too."

Charles Dimmich had risen swiftly from relative obscurity to political prominence in the most populous state of the union, and he had done so on the shoulders of a garbage mogul, Mike Ajanian. Why would he risk it all by incurring the wrath of Mike's daughter, his wife Aurora?

I'd met her at old Mike's office. She was what they used to describe as a spitfire. Spoiled, volatile, and unfortunately, a dead ringer for her old man. I figured Dimmich married her for her connections and not her

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looks. And Aurora Ajanian Dimmich impressed me as being smart enough to have known that all along.

Maybe Dimmich just didn't care what anyone thought any more. Or more likely, his star had risen beyond the reach of even old Mike Ajanian. The Exceptional Life seizure might have made him feel invulnerable, omnipotent. Its impending sale boosted Dimmich into the stratospheric world of international finance, billion dollar deals, and foreign corporations.

The Exceptional Life scandal was one of those junk bond deals gone bad, and I won't bore you with all the details. The media bludgeoned us to death with them for weeks. A few million dollars were in default (out of a portfolio of billions), and that was enough of an excuse for Dimmich to flex the newly acquired muscles of his office.

His first official act as commissioner was to seize control of the insurance company, founded by former Wall Street whiz kid Otto Fredericks. In a grandstanding move, Dimmich froze the assets of the corporate giant just in time for a soundbite on the five o'clock news. The reclusive Fredericks' lifetime reputation was ruined, as was the financial future of millions of small policyholders and pensioners. Rumor has it the insiders bailed out in time, as did anyone who was healthy enough to be reinsured somewhere else. Exceptional was left holding a high percentage of policies on some very ill people, the ones most likely to make a claim. They have a term for that situation in the insurance business: adverse selection. It's not what you'd call a wise business strategy.

Don't worry about Otto Fredericks. He wasn't hurting financially. My sources had him vacationing somewhere in the south of France, and bet he wasn't staying in youth hostels.

Just how big a man was the late Charles Dimmich? Big enough to bring the great to their knees, but in the end not so big after all. It took the usual six pallbearers to do the lifting, and according to my sources, two of them had bad backs and were faking it.

Which reminded me, it was time to call it a day. I checked into a hotel with a view of the American River and spent a few enjoyable hours baking in the sauna and then stretched on the table while a ham-handed house masseur kneaded the kinks out of my spine.

In the morning when I reviewed my notes, something McWire had said made me

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choke on my fresh-squeezed. I was angry on two counts. First, because I hadn't put it together at the time, and second, because it meant another trip up to boony-land, with a lot of boulder hopping thrown in. With my short legs all I could say was "golly-gee."

I met McWire at his office in Del Oro. He seemed more subdued than before. I left my car at the only gas station in town and we took his four by four up to the lake. On the way he filled me in on his morning. It was more of the florid prose I'd heard on my last trip. Apparently McWire had sold a lot of these big-ticket Exceptional Life annuities to a whole flock of retirees. And now they were stuck, with no one to scream at but him. McWire was spending most of his time trying to smooth out the unsmoothable. I had to hand it to him, the guy had ethics. Most of the insurance hacks I know, especially the "retired" ones, would have washed their hands of the whole fiasco and started pushing some other company's policies. Ethics and ulcers seem to go hand in hand. Which is to say, McWire didn't look too good.

I'd had the presence of mind to wear jeans and sneakers for that day's outing. There was no point in looking elegant in one of my custom-tailored suits if all I was going to do was thrash around in the underbrush. I had certainly made a wise fashion choice. At his place we transferred to a couple of those illegal ATV's—a sort of motorized tricycle with oversized tires. The noise was deafening, but we were able to snake our way from his place through the chaparral and fallen trees to what was left of Delpano Shores.

The plane was long gone, and nobody's bones were bleaching on the shore. The whole place was strewn with smooth football-sized rocks that made it hard to keep my footing. Except for bits of black and yellow crime scene tape fluttering in the breeze, the place was pristine—could have been the backdrop for some beer commercial.

"Refresh my memory, Mr. McWire. When were you out here last?"

"Not more than three weeks ago, actually. Sometimes I take guests exploring. Win Hackett was up here with me. He used to fish all these watersheds. Actually remembered the old Delpano Shores. I can look up the date if you'd like."

"I will need to know the date for my report. Is Mr. Hackett a friend?"

"More of a client, really. He's

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a double-dipper. Has twenty years with the military and another twenty with the feds. Made some bucks in real estate, too."

"What did you do for him?"

"The usual. A little estate planning, some life insurance, a few deferred annuities."

"With Exceptional Life?"

"Absolutely. That was why he was up here. Irate in the extreme. Hopped in his RV and drove the five hundred miles up here two days after Exceptional's assets were frozen. Climbed all over me, really chewed me out."

"He had all his assets tied up with Exceptional?"

"Hardly. Maybe five percent from what I can tell. He is pretty secretive. Still, two hundred thousand is two hundred thousand."

"This Hackett does have some substance."

"Like I said, two solid pensions, income-producing real estate, and who knows what else. Funny about money, though. He looks like he hasn't got a dime, like he's scraping by on Social Security. Except for his RV, the inside, that is. Outside's dinged and rusty, inside's chock full of seventy years' worth of fishing tackle and old hunting paraphernalia, a veritable shrine of family photos, and the latest in radar detection and communication equipment."

"Sounds like it's part rolling museum, part command center."

"Suits his style. Like a lot of old widowers, he spends most of the time on the road. Visits friends, wanders all around. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of most of the byways in the western U.S. and Canada. I hope my memory for detail is half as good as his when I get to be that age."

"Let's test your memory now. Where was Mr. Hackett headed after he left Del Oro?"

"Gosh, I don't know. Once he cooled down, he apologized to me and said he'd be spending a few weeks on the road. Heading toward . . . Win . . . I remember it sounded like his first name. Winnemucca? Winnetka? Winnipeg? Wish I could remember."

Win Hackett had taken leave of Ross McWire less than two days before the murders and headed for parts unknown. I might have driven right by him on the way back to the city the day before. There were twenty or thirty campsites on the highway within five miles of McWire's place, each full of nondescript campers and trailers.

Perhaps Hackett was a

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harmless hothead, perhaps not. But Mike Ajanian was paying me to track down leads, and Hackett was one. I could make a career of it just interviewing irate Exceptional Life policyholders. I hoped it wouldn't come to that.

McWire said Hackett was funny about money, and when I did a credit check, he came up clean, almost nonexistent. Other than several dozen loans secured by real estate, he had no credit history. No credit cards of any kind. One of those guys who carries a roll of bills and pays cash for everything. Made it hard to track his movements. It seemed like a good time to buzz down to L.A. and chat with Mr. Win Hackett.

I checked into a pink plastic motel in Hermosa Beach that had a view of the ocean if you stood on the roof and squinted through the haze. When I rang Hackett's home, the answering machine picked up. It was one of those cheesy ones that make the caller wait while it fast-forwards through the accumulated messages. I hung up after about fifty beeps—either Hackett wasn't home, or he wasn't picking up his messages.

Besides the convertible, I have a mobile command center of my own, a small closed-sided delivery van outfitted with a complete office, cellular phone, fax, the whole surveillance works. And being short, I don't have to hunch over when I move around inside. The van looks right at home in a residential neighborhood, and it is very comfortable.

Hackett's place was a well-maintained older tract home. Double gates in the fence next to the garage led to a specially built parking pad for his RV, which wasn't there. From my credit check, I knew he owned several properties on the block, and I decided to make my inquiries at one where he wasn't landlord.

Most of the houses on the block were rough around the edges. It was a neighborhood of single family dwellings slowly being gobbled up by highrise condos. The occupants were mostly transient rentals rather than homeowners. I settled on the only "pride of ownership" place on the block. The roof looked good, the paint was new, the lawn was trimmed and peopled by hundreds of painted ceramic gnomes and animals.

An old woman answered from behind the protective grillework of her screen door. I noticed the same wrought-iron grillework on all the windows. It was delicate-looking and painted white like the trim, but

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it said something about the neighborhood, or at least the perceptions of the tenant. She was one of those California grandmas—about seventy-five years old, lean, overly made up, hair like an old Doris Day movie and skin like old boot leather from too many years poolside baking in the sun. She was wearing a silk-screened T-shirt that proclaimed, "There is no life east of Sepulveda." Her bloodshot blue eyes jumped all over me with interest.

"My word! You're one of those dwarves, or a midget, or a little person, aren't you?"

This was hardly news to me. I flashed a bogus business card that identified me as a bank employee and explained that I was doing a background check for one of Hackett's loans. The door swung open, and she invited me into her cage.

It was a comfortable place, clean to the point of sterility. Everything was neatly stored in its proper place. Her name was Dora Katz. My guess was she lived alone, and the tray with the frosty pitcher of margaritas was lunch. From where she had been sitting, she had a clear shot out the window at a long stretch of street and, because of the hills, several streets beyond. Old Mrs. Neighborhood Watch.

"I've known Win Hackett for years," she said. "Not well, of course. He wasn't around much until he retired. Ha! He isn't around much now. Not since Maggie died."

"Maggie?"

"His wife. Simply devastated Win when she died two years ago. But the stories she told about their years abroad! Win was in the diplomatic corps, you know. That's almost the same thing as the CIA. Traveled all over the world. I'm a homebody myself," she said, tapping the stencil on her shirt front. "Hawaii and San Francisco are the only foreign countries I've ever been to."

"About Mr. Hackett."

"He's been through a lot lately, that's for sure," she said, pouring another drink. "First Maggie, and then the Terwilligers. The man has no family left whatsoever. Absolutely the saddest thing."

I nodded and waited to hear.

"They lived in the teal-colored house up near the corner. If it wasn't one of Win's, it is now. He owns most of the houses on that side of the block. It was in all the papers. Simply devastated everyone who knew him—especially Win. You see, Bev Terwilliger was his sister and not even sick."

"Sick?"

"Mark—that was her husband—just found out he had in-

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operable cancer. Terrible news. My Sammy died the same way, in terrible pain . . . anyway, Bev and Mark were inseparable. One night they made a murder-suicide pact and Mark blasted them both to kingdom come with one of Win's revolvers."

"I'm sorry."

"Win was beside himself with grief. Went berserk in the funeral home, throwing flower arrangements to the floor. It was quite a scene. All he could say was, 'They didn't have to worry, I would have helped them. They didn't have to worry, didn't they know that?' Bev was his only remaining family, you see."

If Win Hackett held true to form, he never stayed on the road more than three weeks straight. He was a landlord, and he tended to be home around the first of the month, rent day. It was almost that time of the month; I didn't have long to wait. I spent some of my time at the assessor's office matching loan numbers to parcel numbers (found something interesting there), and in the library leafing through back issues of the *Daily Breeze*. The Terwilliger murder-suicide shared headline space with the last echoes of Dimmich's takeover of Exceptional Life. There was little Dora Katz hadn't already gushed at me: devoted couple, thirty year marriage, no children. Just names on a page, everybody dead.

The next afternoon Hackett's phone rang off the hook. Either his answering machine was full, or he was home. Given Hackett's temperament, I decided to observe him from afar at first—from the safety of my van.

It was dusk when I arrived. A red-orange glow was settling over the Pacific. The RV bay next to the garage was filled with the unimpressive vehicle McWire had described. A light burned from deep within the house, and with my scope I was able to make out a man's form in the kitchen. Hackett sat alone at the table with a bottle and glass. One leg was propped up on a chair, the foot in a cast. But otherwise Win Hackett looked as tough as nails. He was lean and wiry, his balding head clean-shaven and glistening in the lamplight.

After his third drink, the ramrod in his back began to flex, and he lost some of his military bearing.

"The moment of truth," I said to no one in particular.

Alcohol can make men mean, or make them mushy. Hackett might be violent in his present

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state, but I'd never know until I pushed his buttons. In any event, his guard was down. I had a pistol in my pocket because, unlike Mae West, I didn't know if he'd be glad to see me.

When he came to the door, his eyes were smoldering, his head clouded in an aura of twelve-year-old scotch. I played it straight, told him about my talk with McWire, and said I was sorry about the Terwilligers. He was calm, almost cordial.

"Heck of a deep voice you got," he said, intending it as a compliment.

But when I tried to ask him about his whereabouts at the time of the Dimmich killing, his soul snapped shut.

"Go to hell, runt!" he shouted as he slammed the door in my face. And through the door I heard his muffled snarl, "What's the world coming to? Justice arrives on my doorstep as a deformed freak?"

I wondered again if the king's ransom Ajanian was paying me was enough.

I decided to stake out the place in case Hackett decided to hit the road. But I was at least one man short for a twenty-four-hour gig, and one short man besides. I waited an hour until the lights went out in the house before I pulled on my sneakers and scrambled over the fence. It was a moonless night. I had just spiked all the passenger-side tires and convinced myself that even if he was innocent I was doing Hackett a favor. He was in no condition to drive. I was watching the RV settle to the ground at an awkward angle when the shifting load caused the door to pop open. I flicked on my penlight and went exploring. The pitched floor was like a carnival funhouse and made the going tough. Loose fishing tackle from an overturned box was strewn across the floor. McWire had been right. The place was loaded with enough radio equipment to pull in Radio Free Mars, not that there was anything up there I had to hear. It made my rolling office look like something Fred Flintstone rigged up.

I was examining the family photos on the wall when I heard gravel ground underfoot, followed by the heavy clomp of a foot in a cast. Hackett was coming, and there was no easy way out.

I thumbed the safety off just as I heard a *whoosh-thunk* as something struck the wall opposite the open door.

"All right, you bastard," he yelled. "You ruined a thousand dollars in tires here, and some-

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body's going to pay."

Another *whoosh-thunk,* a little to the left of the first. Hackett's flashlight searched the room as he scrambled inside. He was struggling on the uneven floor in his plaster cast and facing the wrong way when I spoke.

"Careful," I said.

He whirled toward me and something tore through my earlobe on its way to the wall. The searing pain was a shock, and I fired out of reflex as Hackett stumbled to the floor gasping.

I found a light switch and lit the scene. Hackett lay on the floor clutching his side. He'd live. An empty pistol-grip crossbow lay on the floor between us. He glared at me.

"You! The Big Voice!"

"You aimed high, Hackett."

"Normal man would have a hole in his heart right now."

"Like you have, Hackett?"

Hackett set his jaw in a scowl.

"It was your sister, wasn't it?"

And he broke.

It took a while, but I got the whole thing out of him. Win Hackett propped himself up against the slanted wall of the RV and idly toyed with some fishing lures as he spun the tale.

Bev and Mark Terwilliger weren't the successful investors that he was. Mark lost their life savings in a series of Texas real estate deals trying to compete with him, not that Hackett had ever been competing. They'd come to California to live in the teal house where they later died. It was Hackett's teal house, just as his nosy neighbor had suspected and I knew from the assessor's records.

Mark Terwilliger's only income was a fixed pension funded by Exceptional Life. When Dimmich froze the assets, no payments could be made. Mark's pride was already hurting; he couldn't ask his brother-in-law for another handout. Mark Terwilliger chose the poor man's retirement plan as his way out, and took Hackett's sister Bev with him, using a gun from Hackett's collection to do the deed.

Hackett's rage was too great to simply subside. It needed release. He'd already been up north to lambaste his own insurance agent about the Exceptional Life fiasco. In fact, the murder-suicide had happened when he was gone. Hackett convinced himself that nothing would have happened if Charles Dimmich had left Exceptional Life alone. Charles Dimmich had to pay for Mark's death, and especially for Bev's.

The rest was easy. Hackett motored north in his self-styled

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command center and stalked Dimmich, monitoring his cellular phone calls, waiting for the perfect time. When he overheard Dimmich's plans for an intimate camping trip with Linda Hayes, he knew what to do. He parked at an isolated campsite about two miles from Delpano Shores, hiked in overland, and waited. It's not hard to spot the arrival of a seaplane on a deserted lake. Killing the girl was unfortunate, but she was his aide and his mistress, Hackett argued—how innocent was she?

He'd surprised them at their campfire, catching Dimmich in the shoulder with a broad-tipped hunting arrow. Hackett could have killed him instantly, but he wanted the great Dimmich to suffer. The girl ran, and Hackett started after her but twisted his leg in the rocks. He snapped off two shots with his revolver but wasn't sure he got her. Just then Dimmich lunged toward him, and Hackett fired again, hitting him in the stomach.

Limping and in pain, Hackett completed his bloody mission, first tying Dimmich to a tree and then methodically shooting him with arrows. After the sixth one, Dimmich didn't move. Hackett cut the arrows free, spent the rest of the night limping back to his campsite, and drove to the other side of the Tahoe forest before he sought treatment for his foot. They thought he was just another old fool who'd twisted his ankle hiking.

Hackett actually smiled at me when he finished the story.

"And you know what," he said. "That's what they'll think this time, just another old fool."

A blur rushed toward my face, but Hackett's hand wasn't fast enough. I ducked the blade he'd fished from an overturned tackle box, and it bounced harmlessly off the wall.

"Why didn't you shoot me again, P.I.?" he growled as I bent to pick it up.

And when I looked up again, he was gone—grinning at me through the blood spurting from his slashed throat, a second knife clenched in his hand. His wife's picture smiled lovingly down at him from the wall.

And that was my report to Mike Ajanian, the junk man with the son-in-law who wanted to save the world from junk bonds and ended up on the garbage heap himself, because he couldn't hack it. Or rather, because of Hackett.

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MURDER

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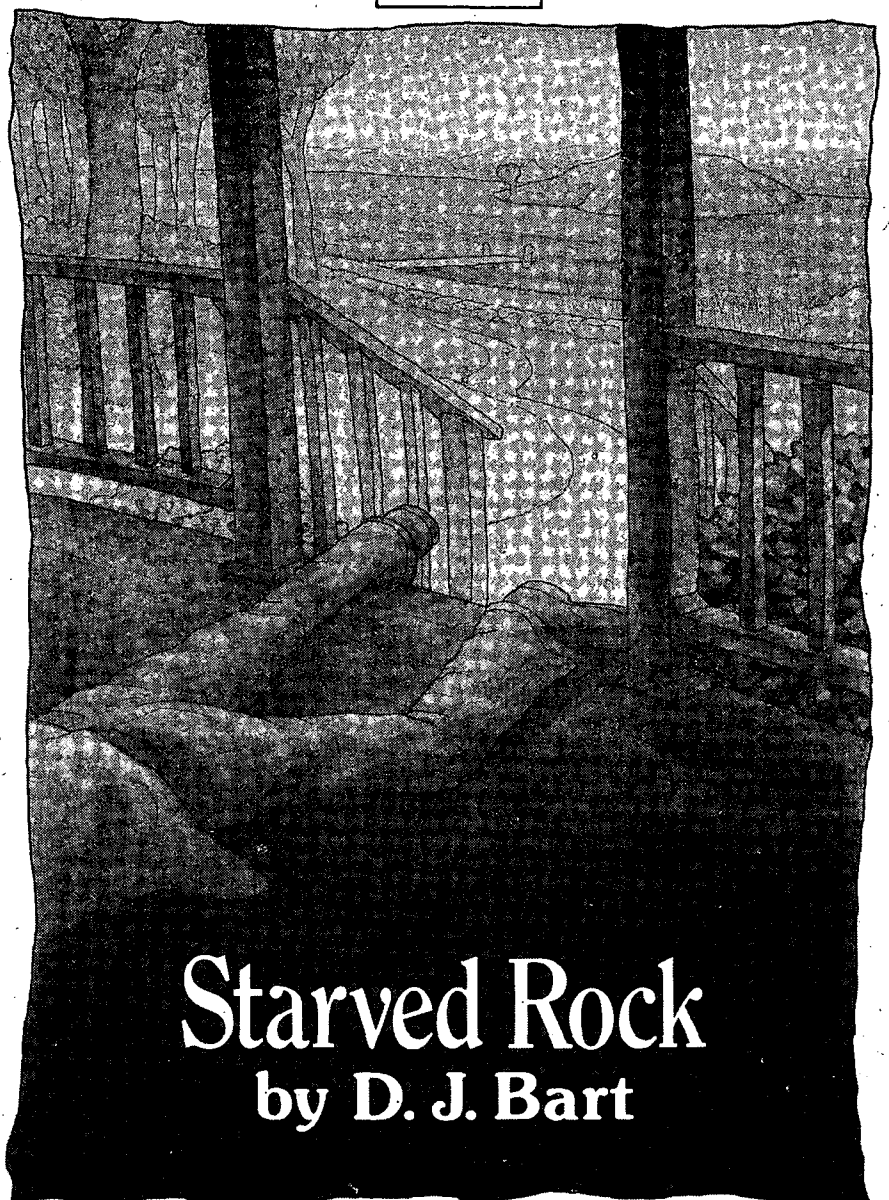
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FICTION



Starved Rock

by D. J. Bart

Illustration by Jim Adams

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"Grandpa, you gotta stop killing people!"

It was all I could do to keep from screaming at the old man, but I didn't know whether someone was out on the river within earshot. Worse, *eye*shot, or whatever you call it.

A quick scan of the river, upstream and down. Nobody. Over toward the island I thought I saw a movement . . . just a heron fishing the shallows on the far side of the high rock ledge.

Stepping up on the porch, carefully avoiding the prostrate body, I faced the old man. Sure now that we were alone, I started yelling. "What in the name of—"

He put a gnarled finger against his lips, a fleck of red on his fingernail. "Shhhhh, Toddy, this is about family," he whispered.

My hero. Standing there, waving around a knife dripping a red dotted line across the recently deceased Harlan Carr's cream-colored pants leg. The old man was as weird a role model as my father had been.

I motioned impatiently at the railing, and he laid the knife down. It was one of those big black knives they sell on TV—claim it'll cut through anything.

"Hey, old man," I began, glancing down at the body, "I didn't stay here after burying my folks just to keep on planting people every other day."

He actually chuckled. Stood right there and came as close to a giggle as a ridiculous old man can. "Well, Toddy," he said, "you shoulda thoughta that when you married a gal looks like Jessica."

He was really beginning to steam me. "Look, Grandpa, just because these guys are always sniffing around Jessica doesn't mean you have to do 'em in."

But my words were lost, he had faded a little and was gazing out toward the limestone island in the river channel. He spoke in a strangely quiet voice. "No way did that Archie Ahrens and his boys starve any Indians out there."

Great, he's on another of his historical mind trips. Shaking my head, I lightly tapped his arm. "Earth to Grandpa—hello in there."

He was oblivious to me. "Those Indians had just stopped to dry some fish or something . . . moved on down toward St. Louis after a coupla days," he said without inflection.

This was too much, he was talking about an incident that happened one hundred and fifty years ago. "Hey, old man, so Ahrens lied about starving those Indians into surrender, so what? I think

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this stiff on our porch might be a more immediate concern than something that happened in eighteen forty-something."

Another damn chuckle. "Eighteen thirty-one," he said, thoroughly amused at my ignorant disregard for historical accuracy.

"Yeah, right, it's real important to get the date right—better to leave ol' Harlan lying out where everybody that happens to be fishing or just plain boating can look over and see him."

Grandpa glanced down at the body with an expression of bewilderment, as if the corpse had just appeared there out of thin air. A quick glance out toward the river.

I nodded. "Now you're getting the picture," I said, grasping one of Harlan's wrists, "and you're going to help me drag him to the willow grove."

It was spooky, thinking of burying Harlan over in the grove with Charlie Savage. Harlan and I'd been pals in high school, inseparable really, people always mistaking us for brothers 'cause we looked so much alike. But he'd become a jerk during the years I'd been out in Hollywood. Married with four kids, and he still chased every amply filled halter in Fort Scott, including my wife Jessica.

Bending over and grasping the dead man's ankles, Grandpa asked me a question that from anyone else would have surprised me, given the circumstances. "What size you think these are?" he inquired, openly coveting Harlan's orange and white argyle socks.

"Couldn't you feel that?" my wife asked Grandpa after slapping his arm and sending an unlucky mosquito to its bloodsmeared demise on the old man's forearm.

Grandpa nodded. "Grandma used to do that whenever I said anything a bit off-color," he said to Jessica with a black grin, sans false teeth.

We were on the recently scrubbed porch, taking the night air. Jessica insouciantly combed her fingers through a tangle of red curls, eyeing the old man with a barmaid's curiosity. "No, Grandpa, I meant the mosquito, couldn't you feel it biting you?"

He brushed the mangled insect corpse from his arm and grinned what a stranger would dub an enigmatic smile. But I knew his expression to be that of a man whose mind is frequently tangled in its own thoughts.

"Well, girly," he said, "skeeters gotta eat, same as people."

Jessica glanced at me, wide-eyed and pretty. She reminded me

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of the cartoon character Annie, only with bright green eyes. "Should we change our name to Addams?" she asked merrily.

Missing the reference, Grandpa asked, "What's wrong with Hatfield?"

I jumped in. "Well, for one thing, old man, having that name has given you the idea that you can just knock off trespassers as if they were on the other side of a feud."

The look he gave me transcended strange and moved right into eerie. And I don't mean Pennsylvania. Transylvania, maybe.

"Toddy, it's been my experience that people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones," he admonished sternly.

I love the old guy, but he hardly ever knew what he was talking about, so I put his remark down to the addled recitation of a cliche by a senile old man.

He got up from the rocker, went down the stairs, and walked over to the riverbank. A slight pause and he stepped gingerly out past the river wall toward the water—stiffly making his way down the swaying ramp to the white-painted dock floating pristinely on the muddy water. Above him bats were darting through the orange glow of the sodium vapor yard light like hungry little shadows.

I watched his body sway in concert with the sound of water as it lapped against the flotation barrels beneath the dock. After a little while, he spoke. His voice was soft, but clear in the night air. "We'd just settled into those new chairs your mother had gotten at Target . . . nice breeze, just like tonight."

Jessica shook her head slowly, her freckled nose wrinkled up against the threat of tears. She crossed her arms, holding herself, as if it were late fall instead of mid-July.

We could hear the old man's words because sound carries over and along water even better than on fiber optics. Many's the night we'd sit on the porch and hear the quiet conversations of some Illinois residents, three quarters of a mile across the river, as clearly as if they were sitting next to us.

Grandpa spoke with an uncharacteristic tone of awe in his voice. " . . . saw the drunken fool weaving down the river with his daughter skiing behind . . . by god, those cigarette boats are fast!"

I wanted to go inside, away from his rambling, but knew that Jessica would be angry. Disregard was an unforgivable sin in her book.

The old man's recounting of that night two years ago always failed to include the fact that my perpetually contentious parents

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had been busy arguing about what type of tree it was that was growing out of the rocky soil of Starved Rock Island. And because of this, they'd not noticed the obvious lack of control the driver of the boat was exhibiting as he wildly serpentined down the channel towards the island.

"Sum'bitch smashed right into Starved Rock over there—made just a hell of a racket—I'm halfway outa my chair and hollering at your folks . . . they didn't hear me," the old man was saying.

They didn't hear him because they were, by that time, hurling the names of various flora at each other at the top of their lungs, the way primitive people used to fling stones and spears. *"Elm"*—"oak"—*"willow"*—"birch"—

" . . . damn boat bounced off the island and started skittering over the water sideways . . . the girl went down way behind. Almost drowned, I guess," he said.

Actually, she had to be given mouth-to-mouth. In fact, I heard that it'd been Harlan Carr who'd revived her. Pulled her out of the water and onto the island. Lucky for her she had been well endowed or he'd probably have just kept on trolling by, leaving a flat-chested girl to her fate.

Grandpa's voice was a high whine now. "Don't like to admit it, but I jumped toward the island to try and get outa the way. Too late, though—boat smashed into the dock and the motor hit me in mid-air."

I looked over at Jessica. She was crying openly now. But with the tears there was an angry set to her mouth. I knew she was being buffeted by the images Grandpa was describing and also the feelings she had about all the foster homes she'd been in as a child. To say she had mixed emotions about the concept of "family" would be a monumental understatement.

Grandpa's collarbone had been broken. The drunken boat driver had received only minor lacerations. My parents were killed instantly, presumably in mid-argument, still screaming tree names at each other.

Jessica sniffed and blew her nose.

I stepped up close behind her, wrapping my arms around a perfectly formed body, and nuzzled her neck. "You ever get the feeling you married into a rather bizarre family?" I asked as she hunched her shoulder against my nose.

She turned around and pushed gently, holding me at arm's length. "You know, Todd, if I hadn't seen you in that John Wayne

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flick, I'd probably never have gone out with you—your reputation was not too stable, you know."

I raised my eyebrows. "Oh, this from an ex-barmaid with a list of fallen boyfriends as long as that ol' river out there," I said with a grin, referring to the string of broken hearts she'd left in her wake.

Then realizing my unintentional pun—fallen boyfriends and our private little graveyard in the willow grove—we both broke into uncontrollable laughter. Jessica ended up on the porch floor and, as I was laughing, I reached out for balance, then remembered the dried blood from where Grandpa'd put the knife that morning, jerked back, lost my balance, and almost fell over the railing.

"And you've the grit to say I'm strange," Grandpa said from the first step. He'd come back up from the dock to see about all the racket.

Jessica and I calmed momentarily, exchanged glances, and then both lost it again.

After a few moments of craziness I saw Grandpa through my tear-blurred eyes, shaking his head as though disgusted but grinning widely, infected by our giddiness. Then he smashed another hapless mosquito on the side of his neck and studied the palm of his hand curiously, as if killing was an alien concept to him.

Seeing red's not just a figure of speech. I looked through a curtain of crimson at the fresh rut marks in the lush green lawn. Dammit!

Cops. Parked on the grass like it was blacktop. About six cars, crowded on and off the narrow driveway next to Grandpa's house. I'll admit I'm territorial, all I could think of was getting in the faces of the jerks who had torn up the lawn.

"Hey, Todd—down here!"

I looked toward the voice. Sanity returned and my heart did an about-face and paused, presumably deciding whether to continue beating or just give it up right then and there.

It was Sheriff Daxon. Wagner County's head gendarme.

"The old man confessed, Todd," he yelled, nodding toward the dock where Grandpa stood, whitehaired head bowed.

I hurriedly joined the group of cops and workers who had unearthed the graves of Harlan and Charlie. A glance to the marshy grass downstream from the grove told me they hadn't discovered the third grave . . . that of Jake Poole.

"What the hell ya talking about?" I demanded of Sheriff Daxon

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as I stumbled over one of the two fully occupied black body bags on the ground.

Daxon hiked up his gun belt, reminiscent of the Barney Fife character in the old Andy Griffith Show. "Steady on there, amigo," he said with a gravedigger's grin. "Your grandpa confessed to killing these guys, but we got a witness says it was your wife, Jessica."

"I know my wife's name, Daxon," I said irrationally. Confusion was like a separate reality for me—all I could think of was my wife and my grandpa being in trouble while I stood impotently by, still pissed about the damn ruts in the lawn by the house.

Daxon nodded toward the house. "I'll wager the blood on the porch railing up there'll match ol' Harlan's to a T."

I inhaled and then blew out a long sigh. "How about trying English, Daxon? What the hell is this about Jessica stabbing somebody?"

His already beady eyes squinted down into two little slits, kind of like the horizontal lines on a scope's crosshairs. "I didn't say they's stabbed, boy."

Even though I was out in the open, I felt as if I'd just backed up against a wall. Falling back on my brief stint as a thespian, I tried to "methodize" my earlier anger over the ruts into a show of impatience, hoping my agent had been wrong when he'd told me, in parting, "As an actor, you'd make a good short-order cook."

"I know you didn't, Sherlock," I said, glancing around for salvation, which I then saw lying next to one of the body bags. A clear plastic evidence bag, holding a blood-encrusted knife.

"But I didn't figure you dug those graves with that knife there," I said smugly.

He glanced at the weapon, letting his disappointment gallop across his face before reining in the feeling.

"Where is Jessica?" I demanded.

Daxon shrugged. "She wasn't around when we got here—got an APB out on her."

I sneered. "I know they didn't elect you 'cause you're smart, Daxon, but if you believe that Jessica did this, you must be brain dead."

"Oh, she did it all right," a voice behind me proclaimed.

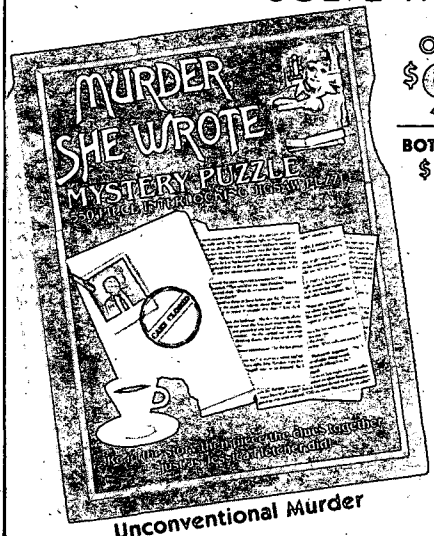
I turned. It was Frank Howard, the burly dairy farmer who lived up across the highway from Grandpa's place. He rented riparian rights from us to have a dock on the river.

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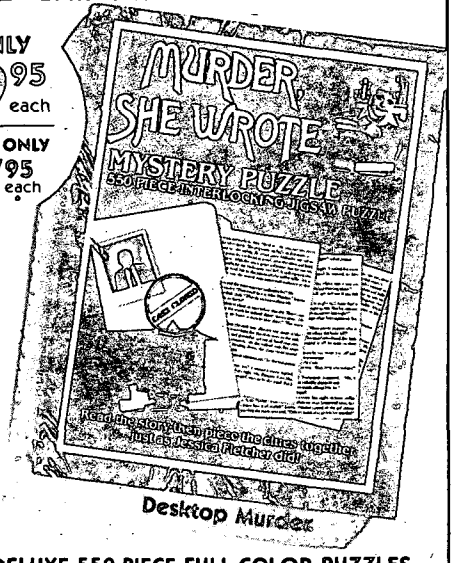
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Giving him my meanest—if you lie, I'll tear your lungs out—look, I said, "Oh, and *you* saw her, did you, Howard?"

He nodded his large round head, rippling his multiple chins. "Yep, I's out checking my trot lines ta' other side of the island . . . saw her over the top of the ledge putting the blade to ol' Harlan there."

I snorted. "Daxon, you can't possibly believe anything this moron says—he claims to be related to Jesse James."

"I am related to Jesse," the fat man bellowed, and then, pointing a pink sausage of a finger, he added, "I saw your wife, Hatfield, sure as I'm standing here. I'd know that red curly hair and sexy—"

Stepping quickly forward, I interrupted the farmer by knocking his finger aside, clutching him by his bloated throat, and squeezing.

His response was something like "arrrrgh!" as he attempted to claw away my hand.

Daxon grabbed my bicep. "Let him go, Hatfield, you're in enough trouble—you have to know about these graves here," he said.

I dug my fingers in a little deeper for just a moment longer, and then released the porcine cretin with a backward push. He stumbled and fell, landing on his prodigious rear with a tectonic thump. Dust rose around him like a dirty afterthought.

You hear about the surprising alacrity of large men all the time—well, this mammoth tower of lard took a full five minutes to huff and puff his way to his knees and stand back up. And then only with Daxon's assistance.

"You're crazy, Hatfield. You, that old man down there, and your murderin'—"

Merely reaching out cut his statement short and sent him quickly waddling up the lane with just one backward glance, a dirty John Deere hat comically askew on his head, pale white forehead sweaty and gleaming in the glare of the sun.

That crummy little dock of his was already ablaze in my mind; a little gasoline after dark and he could just fish from somewhere else.

I crossed the lawn and joined Grandpa on our dock.

He adjusted to the sway from the weight displacement but didn't turn to look at me. "I told 'em I did it, boy," he said quietly, his Missouri twang escaping across the water toward Illinois.

"Well, you're going to have to tell 'em again."

A sideward glance. An expression I'd never seen before settled

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on his weathered old face. "Whatever you say, boy," he told me.

"You know where Jessica is?"

He nodded. "I called her at the laundermat and told her to take off."

"You mean after they'd told you they had a witness?"

Grandpa shook his head, facing me. "No. When I first saw 'em coming down the lane—knew they's after her."

"How could you've known that?" I asked.

I saw his prominent Adam's apple jump after a deep swallow.

"Grandpa?"

He looked at me, blue eyes faded and sad. I could see a deep pain behind them. "I saw her kill Harlan," he said quietly.

"What?" I asked, although I had heard him clearly.

"And Charlie Savage, too," he said, turning away with a sob.

It was just a bum was what some people would say, I guess. But the homeless man lying on the tracks there was just as dead as any rich man could be.

Did Grandpa do this? Get out of the hospital where I was forced to put him because of his insistence that he'd seen Jessica kill Harlan and Charlie? 'Course, he'd only told *me* this, to the cops he'd confessed to both the murders. But they wouldn't believe him.

I knelt down next to the body. Pressing my taut palm against the protruding handle, I felt for minute vibrations that could indicate heartbeat or shallow breathing. Nothing.

He was very dead.

I looked out toward the island. A cabin cruiser had moored off the northern end, tied up to the tree my parents had argued about. A rich guy getting an early start on the weekend—must be nice.

Then a thought, passing through my mind, suddenly decided to idle for a moment and let me get a good look at it. . . .

. . . I hadn't really *seen* Grandpa kill Harlan and Charlie. I'd found Charlie next to the woods north of the property boundary, stabbed to death. I just assumed the old man did it. And then when I'd found him with the bloody knife, standing over Harlan . . . well, again, I'd assumed he'd killed Carr, too.

Sighing, I looked up the tracks toward town. If he didn't kill those men, he was probably really mad at me for not believing him. I'd put my loyalty with Jessica, but I hadn't heard from her since that day the cops dug up the graves.

A sound behind me—

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—I started to rise when the pain struck me right in the shoulder blade. Then another and another.

I pitched forward onto the railroad tracks, my consciousness wavering, and thought, if this is Grandpa's doing, he's in big trouble.

A dream maybe . . . or some kind of delirium, I wasn't sure. It was my mother and father sitting at the dinner table, and I was just a boy. They were arguing about how long meat should be cooked and whether our dog should be spayed. Which was strange, because it was a male.

". . . Toddy," a voice said from the kitchen.

My eyelids felt like lead slabs. I struggled to open them so I could see who was in the kitchen.

"Honey?" A woman's voice.

I opened my eyes and witnessed the birth of a star as molten light seeped directly through my brain, searing the back of my head. My eyelids slammed shut.

"Wasn't the Indians either, boy," my grandpa's voice insisted.

Tensing against the light, I opened my eyes. The pain was less, and I was able to keep them open.

Jessica and Grandpa were standing at the end of the hospital bed I was lying in, their faces concerned but hopeful.

"You're going to be all right, honey," Jessica said, coming around to my left side, gently picking up my hand.

Across from her, Sheriff Daxon was grinning like an undertaker at an avalanche. "It was that Foster girl, Todd," he said confidently. A tone that seemed incongruous with the man's usual uncertainty.

"Foster girl?" I asked.

"You know—daughter of the guy who ran into your folks and Grandpa on the dock," Daxon said impatiently, as if it were as clear as distilled water but I was being intentionally obtuse.

I frowned.

Daxon clicked his tongue and said, "Charles Foster . . . it was his girl, Tracy."

Jessica squeezed my hand. "She had been out there all the time, Todd . . . watching us," my wife said with a tiny shudder.

Daxon chuckled. "Yeah, used her old man's boat as a base of operations."

"This girl stabbed me?" I asked.

Grandpa had been drinking water from my glass and was wiping his chin. "You and those other guys, too," he told me.

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I sighed. I didn't know what the hell they were talking about.

Wanting to get off this confusing subject, I asked Jessica, "Where'd you go?"

"To my sister in St. Louis . . . afraid to call you, thought they might have tapped our line."

Daxon walked to the end of the bed and stood next to Grandpa. "After Foster ran into the dock and killed your folks, his career as a lawyer went down the tubes and he ended up killing himself. His daughter, this Tracy Foster, decided to take her revenge against you guys. But she killed Harlan and Charlie by mistake," he said with a grin.

It started to make sense. Although it seemed a little farfetched for someone to have killed the wrong person twice.

As though reading my mind, Grandpa said, "She stabbed Harlan 'cause he looked like you, but Charlie didn't look like you *or* me." He frowned and shook his head.

Jessica suddenly released my hand and walked to the window. I had caught a glimpse of her face as she turned away; that strange mixture of hurt and anger.

Daxon glanced at her and then walked around to the side of the bed where she'd been standing. "The Foster girl's pretty much out of it, won't even go to trial. She's in that hospital where they had your Grandpa," he said.

Grandpa sighed. "I thought I'd seen *Jessica* kill Charlie and Harlan—'cause of the curly red hair and all."

"Wig, most likely," Daxon said.

I couldn't believe it, Grandpa hadn't killed anybody. I felt a real sense of shame, especially considering what was lying in the marshy grass by the river. But I also realized I'd get over it.

Spring again. The old man's sleeping in that raggedy old green hammock by the boathouse. The south side of the little shack is covered with a shimmering, iridescent mantle of twenty-four-hour bugs, their translucent wings gently moving in the sunlight, just this single day that is their entire life.

Jessica's at her Lamaze class in Fort Scott. I told her I'd go next time. Promised her.

I love the feel of cottonwood tree bark. Cool and smooth. A few months back, late one night, I was standing right here, feeling this same smooth, cool bark.

Waiting. . . .

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Even in the dark I could sense the lowering stormclouds overhead, threatening rain. I remember looking straight up into the high limbs, thinking that the violent wind was thrashing around up there like an invisible wild animal of some kind, caught in the branches and writhing about, trying to free itself.

Boy, the look on Jake Poole's face when he said—

"—uh, what . . . what the . . . you're supposed to be out of town." Stammering as he stood wet and dripping in front of me.

I had just stepped out from behind this big old cottonwood as he emerged from the river after having dogpaddled over from the island. Big dummy couldn't swim for spit. I knew he'd choose tonight, thinking I was out of town, to accomplish his much-bragged-about goal of "nailing that copper-headed gal, Jessica Hatfield."

He backed toward the river's edge. "What're you going to do?" he asked.

I grinned. "Question is . . . what were *you* going to do?"

He reached down for a large, smooth river rock. . . .

It's taken a long time to figure it all out, but I think I've finally got a fix on it. Jessica had watched Jake Poole and me struggle that night and saw me break his neck and ultimately bury him. Right here in this marshy grass. And I think Grandpa saw it, too.

A few months later, Charlie Savage, self-proclaimed wife and child beater—"gotta keep 'em in their place"—must have attacked Jessica down here somewhere and she stabbed him in self-defense, leaving the body for me to find and dispose of; which I did, in the willow grove, thinking Grandpa had done the deed. Grandpa had witnessed the killing, but kept quiet . . . family business, he would have said.

Then along comes the Foster girl, killing Harlan, thinking it was me. Grandpa thought he was seeing Jessica up to her deadly pranks again. He was going to hide the body when I came along and accused him of killing Harlan.

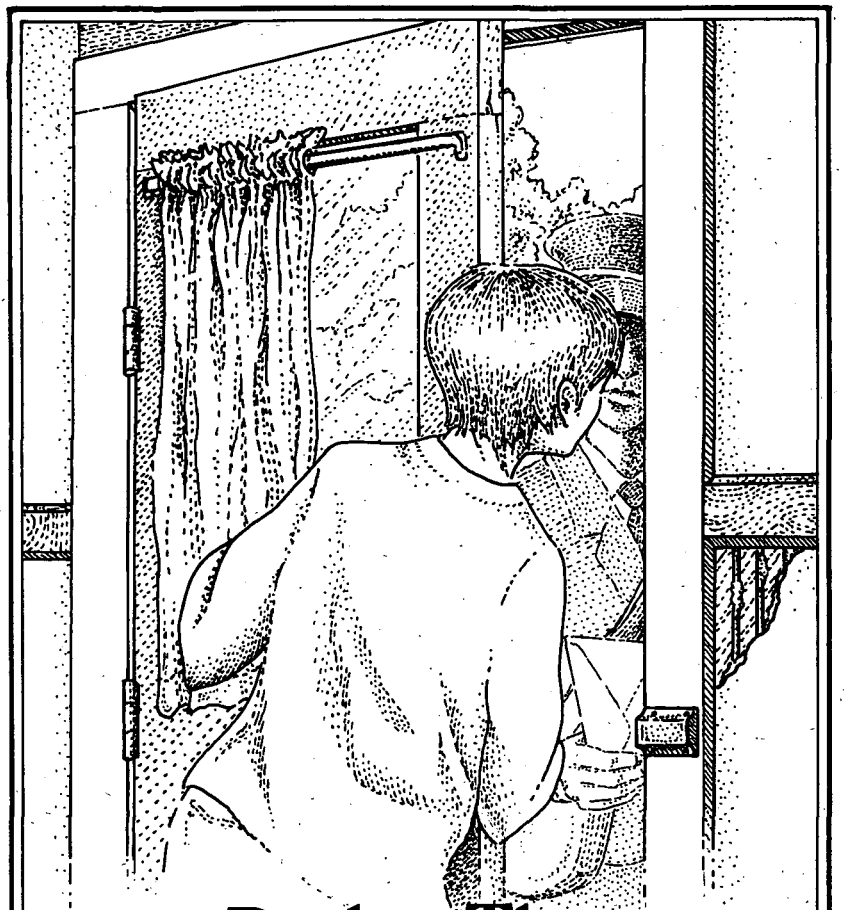
Turns out, Grandpa was the only innocent one in the family.

. . . River looks calm today.

Who's that out by the island, I wonder? Looks like that Burns kid. Rumor has it he's into date rape at the community college. But none of his victims have come forward yet.

Well, I guess ol' Jake Poole here could use a little company.

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Darker Than Just Before the Dawn

by John H. MaGowan

Illustration by Laurie Davis

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Seventy-five cents for an out-of-town newspaper was an extravagance, one she would surely regret. She picked the top paper from the stack and reread the headline in the lower right corner of the first page: "Serial Killer Terrorizes New England Community." Unable to deny herself, she carried it to the cashier, partially compensated for her immoderation by substituting a pack of generic cigarettes for her regular brand, and hurried home. In the kitchen, she lit the burner under the teakettle and spread the newspaper out on the table.

"Bethlehem, New Hampshire, Dec. 10," she read. "Someone in this picturesque town, tucked snugly into a valley between the White and Green Mountains, has it in for optimists; cheerful optimism seems to be the only common thread among the victims of a puzzling series of grisly crimes that has plagued this community since early autumn."

She paused to open the cigarettes. Drawing one out of the pack she lit it, grimacing slightly at the unfamiliar flavor. "The first victim," she continued reading, "was lifelong resident Sarah Watrous, slain in early autumn. Her lifeless body was found, suspended from a brightly colored maple tree, by a New York family touring the fall foliage for which this area of the country is famed. A neatly lettered sign pinned to her coat read SHE'S HANGING IN THERE. There was no apparent motive for the crime, and no suspects; the victim was retired, had no surviving relatives, and lived alone. Her modest estate was willed to several charities. 'Aunt Sal,' as she was known in the community, is remembered here as a cheerful woman who was a tireless dispenser of homespun New England wisdom."

When the teakettle's shrill whistle interrupted her reading, she dropped three used tea bags into a cup and covered them with boiling water. As they steeped, she remembered her conversation with Aunt Sal on the morning of the crime. "You youngsters wan't around in the Depression," Sal had said, "when times were really bad. We hung tough, we did. That's what you gotta do, girlie, hang in there."

One by one she squeezed out the tea bags, finding the three had combined to produce a barely acceptable cup of weak tea. Still she pondered a moment before deciding to deposit them in the trash.

"Rev. Harold Mullens," she continued reading over the rim of the teacup, "a local clergy-

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man, became the second victim a few weeks later. His badly mutilated corpse was found in a mixing vat at a local bakery. A sign taped to the vat read HE IS A BATTER PERSON FOR THIS. Again there seemed to be no motive; Rev. Mullens lived quietly with his widowed sister. A sometime author, his self-help book *The Adversity Advantage* appeared briefly on the New York *Times* (Nonfiction) Best Seller List last year. (See 'Community Terrorized,' 7A, col. 6)" ended the page.

Before turning to find the continuation of the story, she snubbed out the cigarette she had left burning in the ashtray, sipped her tea, and remembered Reverend Mullens' visit on the evening before his death. He had been delighted to share his philosophy with her, telling her to be thankful for her difficulties. "Adversity," he had told her, "is your opportunity for personal growth. You'll be a better person for it."

Patting the side of the kettle, she decided the water was still hot, selected a fresh new tea bag, and dropped it into her cup. After adding hot water she returned to the newspaper, turning the pages to find the continuation.

"The third link in this bizarre chain was a dual slaying at the local high school. Two teachers, believed to have been working late, were apparently bludgeoned into unconsciousness before having chloroform-soaked rags taped over their mouths and plastic bags tied over their heads. On the chalkboard someone, but most probably their assassin, left the message THESE TWO SHALL PASS.

"The theory that the slayer was seeking out optimists began to take shape. Physical education teacher Stanley Szenkow had been the school's basketball coach, and was locally noted for his eternally cheery, wait-till-next-year optimism in the face of seventeen consecutive losing seasons, while English teacher Nancy Young was again directing the Drama Club's annual presentation of *It's a Wonderful Life.*"

It was over coffee and doughnuts, after the last PTA meeting, that she had spoken with Stan and Nancy, supporting their weightless prattle while amusing herself by wondering how long their grins would last if they knew a detective, hired by Stan's wife, had followed them on their last few trips to a small motel outside of Concord. The end of the conversation was still clear in her mind. "Remember," Nancy had offered happily as Stan nodded agreement, "this too shall pass."

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"Outside Friendly Frank's Food Fair supermarket," proceeded the following paragraph, "a sign advertises 'Friendly Faces—Friendly Phrases—Friendly Prices.' Inside, the walk-in freezer yielded the latest in this sequence of macabre crimes. Last Saturday the frozen-solid corpse of owner-manager Francis Caponetti was found grotesquely propped up in a corner with a note pinned to his apron: HE'S KEEPING A STIFF UPPER LIP."

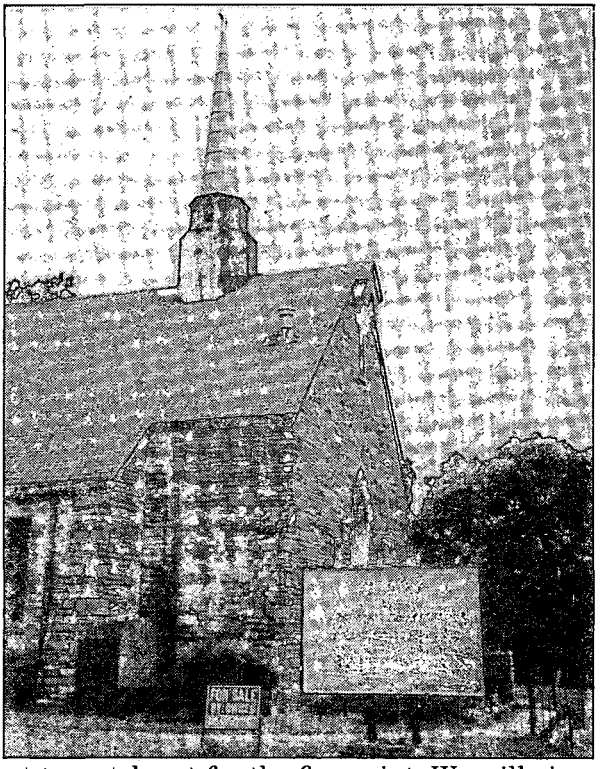
Her thoughts turned to last week when she had done the little shopping she could. It was a slow and careful process, trying to keep a running total in her mind as she matched coupons culled from the Sunday paper to boxes of macaroni, selected dried beans, peas, and lentils, and half-price bread from the day-old shelf. Even then the total had been more than she had to spend. Frank himself had been working the register when she unloaded her cart, smiling patiently when she had to return a few items. "Keep a stiff upper lip," were his exact words as he loaded those few bags of groceries into the cart for the trip to the parking lot.

A rap on the door brought her back to the present. As she signed for the registered letter, she noted the return address of the mortgage company. She had been expecting it, but it was still one more drop in this endless deluge of disasters. The letter carrier had also seen the return address. He knew what it meant and wanted to help. "You know what they say," he offered. "It's always darkest just before the dawn."

As he turned to go, she focused her eyes on the antique flatiron now used as a doorstop. I'll bet, she thought as she bent to pick it up, it's even darker with a mail pouch jammed over your head.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

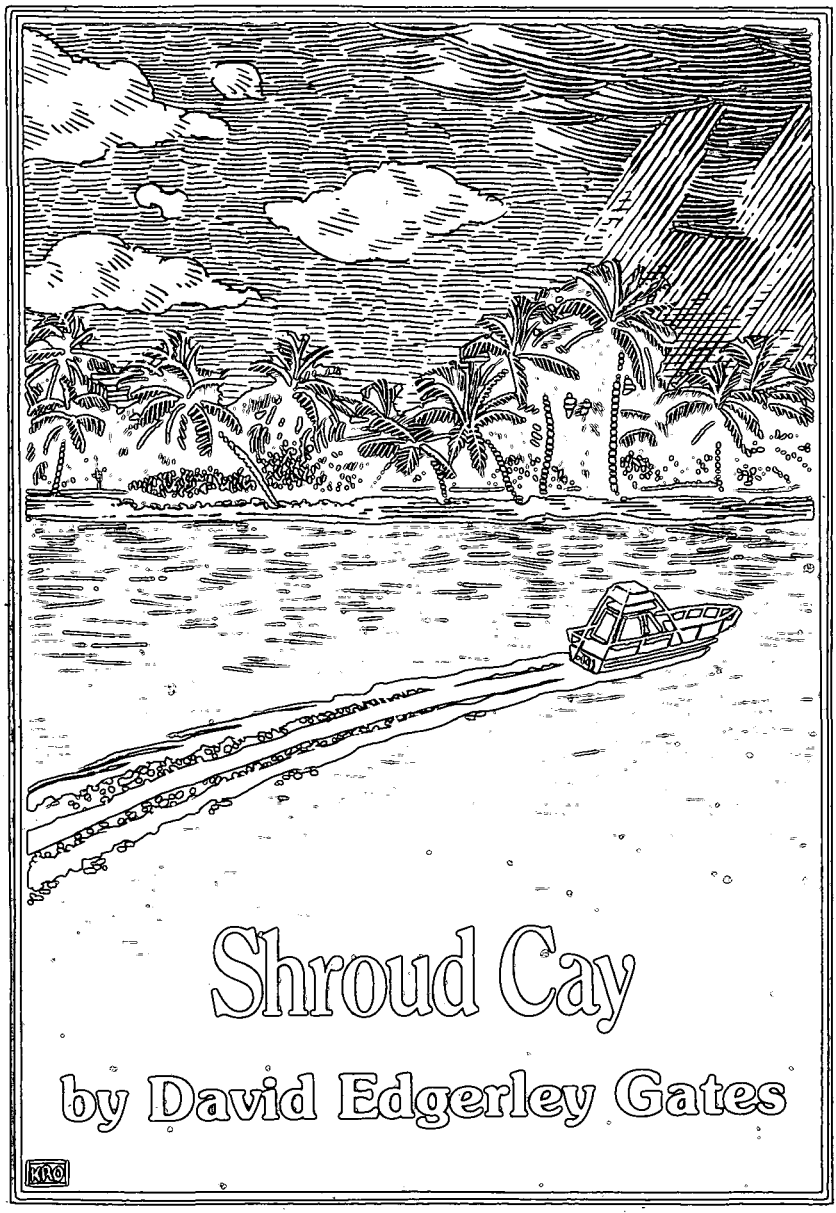


You'll want to watch out for the fine print. We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035. Please label your entry "March Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

Photo by Curt Fischer

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Shroud Cay

by David Edgerley Gates

Illustration by Dan Krovatin

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That early in the day, with the sun only just about to break above the water and the sky an empty bowl of light, the Exuma Cays were nothing but a blue smudge on the eastern horizon. Later on, as it heated up, and both water and sky became one mirror of white glare, the islands would be easier to make out, for reasons he'd never quite understood. Supposedly it had something to do with parallax or surface temperature or retinal capacity, or maybe the curve of the earth. Not that it mattered. Keeler might have had the usual run of sailor's superstitions, but he didn't have an inquiring turn of mind, not for the kind of things his occasional charter clients liked to philosophize about, and nobody had ever called him sentimental. Out in open water, you couldn't afford it.

He cut the engines and let the boat ride the swell. Mornings were best, he'd long since decided, for just about everything that *did* matter. That's when the fish came, and women were at their most languorous, and the world seemed freshly minted as a new coin, the images bright and the edges sharp, and you could almost turn the coming day between your fingers like a shiny penny, and wonder whether it was going to come up heads or tails.

He dropped anchor in shoal water and rattled his enameled metal cup against the binnacle to rouse Cousin Andy from his nap. Cousin Andy was Keeler's crew. He wasn't Keeler's cousin, or anybody else's that Keeler knew about, although he claimed kinship to half Andros Island. None of the families there would own up to it, so Cousin Andy's title was a kind of sarcastic courtesy, the sort of joking nickname you heard called out in boatyards and saloons, or on the docks, and since those were the only places you'd happen to find Andy, the name stuck. Still, he was reliable enough. A good bait man, handy with a gaff, and he could feel his way down the Northeast Providence Channel with his eyes closed, which they usually were, since he spent most of his time drunk, or else sleeping it off. Keeler let him drink beer on the boat; it was either that or hire somebody else, and Keeler liked to keep things simple.

Cousin Andy came topside, yawning and shading his eyes against the sun. Keeler was already checking out his regulator and tanks.

"Morning, cap'n," Andy said.

"Morning," Keeler said, bleeding the lines and tightening the valves again.

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"Coffee's on the stove."

"Your coffee make me loose in de bowels," Andy told him, gazing at the sky. "You got something might firm them up?"

Keeler liked a shot in his coffee himself, but he wasn't about to let Andy have the bottle. "Beer's in the cooler," he said, glancing up. "You look like death warmed over," he commented. "Beer do you?"

"Have to, I suppose," Andy said, grinning slyly.

"All I want is for the boat to be here when I come up," Keeler said. He spit in his mask and leaned over the side to rinse it out.

"My conscience be my guide," Andy said, trying to sound virtuous.

"Aw, screw you," Keeler retorted cheerfully enough, and slipped his fins on. He was already stripped down to his weight belt and trunks. Andy helped him shrug into the tanks and passed the regulator and hoses over his head. Keeler settled his mask, put the mouthpiece between his teeth and took a breath, and let himself topple backwards off the gunwale into the water. It was always a pleasant shock.

The ocean was clear as gin. Cousin Andy's silhouette receded slowly, the liquid light distorting his figure like a prism. Keeler rolled over lazily in the thin current and jackknifed his upper body, kicking down into deeper water. Spent air streamed past his faceplate in a riot of bubbles. What was wonderful to him was the sudden silence. Or not silence exactly, since the underwater world was full of drumming sounds, his breathing for one, and the wave movement against the hull of the boat, or the throb of passing engines from a nearby fisherman, and there were others. The hiss of the sea across the coral, that expansion and contraction of the reef itself, and finny flurries of bonita, along with the dull thunder of manta wings, the quick whistle of squid, and the shudder of a shark's gills as he coursed endlessly in his restless prowl. It was all halfway imaginary. Keeler substituted a certain kinesthetic verve for the deprivation of his surface senses. Moving underwater, like a tadpole, and neither fish nor fowl, Keeler recognized a mystery that he alone could fathom, or so he thought to himself, ironically. The same ocean that threw a turtle onto the strand to lay her eggs tossed the ships and their mariners, praying for safe landfall. He wasn't so foolish as to think it was just him against the ocean. It wasn't antagonistic,

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just the opposite. He found to his delight a larger and sharper sense, a different mix, an awareness of swimming in the hugeness of the sea, and it had stood him in good stead, up until now at least. He knew enough not to get careless.

The wreck was a Liberty ship as it turned out, ten thousand deadweight tons but coming back empty, high in the water and torpedoed as a target of opportunity by a U-boat hungry for an easy kill. Full fathom five, my father's eyes, Keeler thought, and dead these forty years or more. It was that long since the war, anyway. He nudged around the sunken ship, poking here and there, but it wasn't anything that interested him except as a halfway natural phenomenon. Over time, the hulk had come to be an artificial reef, and the creatures of the sea had invested it, creeping along its skin and attaching themselves to it, accreting particles to the hull, so it had become only the outline of a ship, a blurred and furry palimpsest, rubbed and written on by scuttling crabs without an alphabet, and starred with polyps and barnacles and the ubiquitous coral, overtaking and softening the squared edges and sharp angles of the shipwright's steel, making it useful only for ballast, or as an anchor for the vagrant shellfish and drifting plankton. He swam for the surface gratefully, rising toward the light and a lungful of warm air as he sloshed in the waves, and then made for the boat. Cousin Andy was leaning over the side, eager for news, but Keeler didn't have any, only a very human joy to impart, the gladness of still being alive, and of having come back once more from the depths to tell his tale.

They were waiting for him at the marina. Neither one of them looked like IRS, so Keeler took his usual slip without any fuss, and Cousin Andy jumped onto the float and secured the mooring lines.

"Hal Keeler? I'm Jimmy Ventura, and this is my associate, Mr. Pine." He held out his hand, and Keeler took it, putting one sneaker on the dock. Ventura hoisted him up out of the boat. Pine didn't offer to shake hands.

"What can I do for you gentlemen?" Keeler asked them.

"We heard you were a man who kept a weather eye out for opportunities," Jimmy Ventura said, smiling. "And we said to ourselves, that sounds like just the man for us. Didn't we, Mr. Pine?"

"We'd like to hire the boat," Pine said to Keeler, neither ex-

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plaining nor apologizing for Jimmy Ventura's manic effervescence.

Ventura was tricked out in Bermuda shorts and an Oxford shirt, with a long-billed sport fisherman's cap on his head and hundred dollar Adidas running shoes on his feet. His sidekick was wearing loose khaki slacks and Top-Siders with no socks, which Keeler thought was a nice touch, along with the Truman shirt that had dolphins on it, and the brand-new canvas crusher from some mail order firm in the States. They both had aviator sunglasses on, although only Jimmy Ventura had seen much sun lately. Pine was paler than a bookkeeper's toenails, and Keeler didn't figure him for any kind of outdoorsman. For that matter, Ventura looked like he'd be more at home setting pins in a bowling alley than out on the water wrestling with twelve hundred pounds of marlin on the heavy tackle.

"The boat costs four hundred dollars a day," Keeler told them. "That includes the skipper and crew, a tank of gas, and bait. You pay for whatever liquor you want to bring on board, along with any incidental expenses that might come up. I'll ask you for a damage deposit on the fishing gear, too, in case you run into something you can't handle and I lose a rig to a tunny or a shark."

Ventura nodded agreeably. "That sounds fair," he said. "Can we buy a drink and talk it over?"

Keeler left Cousin Andy to tie up the boat and walked up the pier with Ventura and Pine. He started to turn up the slope toward George Town, thinking he'd take them over to the Geneva Club or the Oarsman, which is where he usually took clients if they were buying, but Jimmy Ventura paused in the dusty roadway, and Keeler stopped and glanced back.

"What's wrong with this joint right here?" Ventura asked him, gesturing. He meant Tig's Place, a battered wharfside saloon with walls made out of old packing crates, a corrugated tin roof, and windows with no screens.

Keeler shrugged. "Nothing," he said.

"Let's go, then," Ventura said, grinning. "We could use some local color."

They went inside. It was the slack hour of the day, island time. The early afternoon was too hot for anybody to get bothered about anything, and it was probably hotter under Tig's metal roof than it was outside with the sun overhead. Nobody even turned to look at them

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when they came in. Keeler left a five on the bar and fetched three bottles of Jamaican beer out of the Coke cooler by the doorway to the outside privy. He gestured Ventura and Pine to a couple of chairs near the windows that looked out on the jetty, where he could keep an eye on the boat.

"Okay, what's the pitch?" he asked Ventura. He had a church key in his pants pocket, and he opened all three beers, passing one to Ventura and one to Pine and chugalugging half of his before he even got his elbows on the scarred keg that served as a table. He didn't suppose they were there to fish.

"We're not down here for the fish," Ventura told him.

Keeler nodded. "I didn't think so," he said and took another slug of his beer. "You look more like you're taking advantage of slack Bahamian banking practices."

Pine shifted his weight in his seat, and Ventura favored Keeler with what he must have thought would pass for a cagy smile. "The word is you're a reef-hound, Captain Keeler," Ventura said. "You explore all the wrecks, hoping to strike it rich."

Keeler didn't give him any argument.

Ventura hunched himself forward. "We've got a sure thing for you, Keeler," he murmured. "You play along with us, and you'll be farting through silk." He took a pull on his beer and watched Keeler with hooded eyes.

Keeler finished his beer. "Your round," he said.

Pine got up from the table, left some money on the bar, and fished another beer out of the cooler. He set it down in front of Keeler. Keeler opened it and had a swig.

"We'd be happy to meet your price, captain," Ventura said. "The money isn't of real importance. But you could cut yourself a better deal. We're offering you a percentage of whatever we find."

Keeler didn't think he trusted a man who said money was of no importance. "I'll settle for the four hundred a day plus expenses," he told Ventura. "That keeps us square, and no questions asked."

"If that's the way you want it," Ventura said, with a quick shrug. "No hard feelings, either."

"Not on my part," Keeler said.

"We don't need the bait man," Pine put in. "These jungle bunnies down here make me nervous. Too much sand in their craw, is what it is. They don't show no respect for a white man."

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"Cousin Andy comes with the package," Keeler said mildly, but he felt the skin around his eyes get tight, and he had to keep himself from glancing at Pine. "Andy needs the work, I need the margin of safety," he said to Ventura.

"I'm a rated diver, captain," Ventura remarked.

"You want the boat, you take the crew that comes with it," Keeler said. "You want it any different, find another captain."

"No problem," Ventura said, spreading his hands. "Pick up a spare set of tanks, though, and a second set of diving gear. Rent it or buy it, I don't care, but I'll want to check it out before I use it. Take it out of the advance." He pulled a roll of bills out of his pants pocket and peeled off five hundred bucks. "Here," he said and tucked the cash into Keeler's shirt pocket. "We'll be on the dock at six o'clock tomorrow morning. Have the boat gassed up and ready to go. We'd like to get an early start." He stood up, and Pine did, too.

"I'll be ready to cast off as soon as you decide to show up," Keeler said, looking up at Ventura.

"We'll be there," Pine said.

Keeler glanced at him. "I'm looking forward to it," he said, tipping back his beer bottle.

Ventura and Pine went out.

Keeler sat there, thinking it over. He could always weasel out of the deal and give Ventura his money back, of course, but he might just as well go through with it. In this trade, you had to suffer fools gladly, or you'd never make a dime. He wondered whether his new clients had really wanted to sample some local color, or if it was more that they didn't want to be seen chatting up a local skipper in the tourist bars. Something about those two rubbed him the wrong way, but what the hell. Their money was green enough, and he figured they were entitled to keep their own secrets. Treasure hunters were all paranoids. They probably had an old chart they'd bought from some drunken wharf rat over in Key West, with the wrecks of Spanish galleons spread out across it from the Dry Tortugas to Trinidad. The reefs and shoals of the West Indies were littered with pirates' booty, or so it was said. Christ knew, he'd been looking for it himself long enough.

He saw Cousin Andy duck in and waved him over to his corner for a beer. There was nothing like a charter to make a man feel flush, and Keeler wanted to nurse that feeling. The way he saw it, he had at least until daybreak, which

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gave him a good head start. He sent Andy up to the bar to get a couple of tumblers of Jamaican rum out of the oil drum.

Ventura and Pine showed up on time, he had to give them that. He took the *Siren* out of the inner harbor slowly, with the trawling rods already set out on the flying bridge and Cousin Andy chopping bait in the stern. Keeler figured his customers would appreciate the cover. He was maybe half right. Ventura complimented him on his sense of the occasion, grinning, and then he and his partner both went below. Keeler made for the buoys in the outer harbor and turned west past the old stone breakwater.

She wasn't a big boat, and not very stylish, either, what with her scraped combing and shabby paint, but she was fast and dependable, a forty-three-foot Hatteras with twin Bertram screws. Keeler was always meaning to dress her up a little, but somehow he never got around to it, what with this, that, and the other thing. Still, all his spare money went into the boat. *Siren* was worth the divorce, he calculated. Two divorces, not that anybody was counting. The women in his life had always considered Keeler's boats their rivals, and they weren't that far wrong, he had to admit to himself. He pushed the engines up a notch, to ride over the chop. The big Gulf swells began to slap against the hull, rolling across the straits north of Cuba. His heading was a point or so off west-northwest, out into what local boatmen called Tongue of the Ocean. Ventura and Pine wanted to look at a place that wasn't on the map, or else they could have found it for themselves. It was somewhere to the southwest of Shroud Cay.

Jimmy Ventura came topside about an hour later. They were making some thirteen or fourteen knots, and the sea was relatively flat. There wasn't much bounce. Ventura had a dab of zinc oxide on his nose where it stuck out from under the bill of his cap. He could have used it on his ears. They were angry with sunburn, scabbed over and the skin as red as a boiled lobster. Keeler let the wheel take the path of least resistance, the boat sliding into the trough of the waves. The deck heaved a little.

Ventura took hold of the rail. He looked kind of green around the gills.

"Are we going to be making any weather?" he asked, apprehensive.

Keeler wondered where he'd picked up that nautical turn of

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phrase. Ventura didn't strike him as a sailor. "Not this time of year," Keeler told him. "The hurricanes don't start working their way up the Lesser Antilles until August." He gestured at the radar. The display was reading out a radius of two hundred nautical miles. "You can see a squall line building to the south, off Guantanamo, but that's a day away, at the least. We'll be safe and dry long before it hits."

Ventura squinted uneasily at the horizon.

"Don't worry about it," Keeler said. "The boat'll take a lot of punishment, and we can run for cover if it looks too rough."

"Doesn't look to me like you've got a lot of cover out here," Ventura said, doubtfully.

"You'd be surprised," Keeler told him.

Ventura shot him a look, like a man who didn't like surprises. Then he shrugged, smiling. His teeth were very white. "I guess it's up to you, captain," he said. "We're in your hands."

"That's what you hired me for," Keeler said.

"We did, didn't we?" Ventura remarked, as if he'd just remembered. "Well, bear that in mind, then."

Keeler had been condescended to by the best of them, and he'd never paid it any mind. What bothered him, though, was the unspoken suspicion that Ventura had something else up his sleeve. "What's out there?" he asked bluntly.

"I guess we'll find that out when we get there," Ventura said. "You and me both."

Keeler nodded, and brought the helm up. They had a following wind now, and the boat began to pitch as she jarred into the swell, rushing ahead of the waves. Keeler corrected their course. Ventura went below again. Keeler didn't miss him.

Before noon, they were hove to at the mouth of a little cove east of Cistern Point. The island was only a pinprick in the ocean, just breaking water, and beyond it the bottom shelved off steeply, going down into a trough almost fourteen hundred meters deep. It was pretty far off the beaten track, Keeler thought. Spanish treasure ships out of Panama had made the crossing to Santiago and then worked their way up through the Windward Passage and out past Hispaniola to the open ocean, and a galleon out of Florida would never have braved it this far south. He had to admit, though, there was always a chance. Like the *Atocha*, a wreck salvaged off the Florida Keys. She must have

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been making for St. Augustine, Keeler figured. Any port in a storm. You just never knew. After all, he kept coming back himself.

They had lunch together on the afterdeck, the four of them. Cousin Andy had hooked a couple of snappers on the light tackle while they were under way, and after he cleaned the fish they had them grilled, drizzled with fresh lime, along with some of the cucumber salad Andy had made up before they left port and Keeler had stored in the fridge. The last thing any of them wanted on this trip was a case of the trots. He served beer all around and waited for the other shoe to drop. He knew he wouldn't have long to wait.

"You do all right for yourself, captain," Jimmy Ventura said, his mouth full. Keeler's passengers might have been feeling a little queasy on the trip out, but they'd recovered their appetite. "This is a right handsome repast." Ventura licked some crisp fish skin off his oily fingers and had a pull on his beer. "Yessir," he said, leaning back in his canvas chair and bringing up a satisfied belch. "I may just get used to this kind of life. A white man could live like a king down here in the islands."

"Black man do all right, too," Cousin Andy commented, glancing at him sidelong.

"No offense," Ventura said, grinning. "I meant it's a lazy way of doing things. Suits me just fine."

"Don't get too comfortable," Pine said. "You're the one with work to do."

"Now, my mother always cautioned me against going into the water right after I ate, Mr. Pine," Ventura said. "It wouldn't do to get a cramp, now would it?"

Pine got impatiently to his feet and went to the rail. He looked down into the water, brooding.

"Mom used to take us kids to Rockaway Beach, Captain Keeler," Ventura went on. "Pack a picnic, bring a blanket and a couple of big towels to lie on, coffee cans and a plastic shovel to make sand castles. You know Rockaway?"

"Somewhere in New Jersey, isn't it?" Keeler asked.

"New York," Ventura corrected him, smiling.

"Jersey's for losers," Pine said scornfully, past his shoulder. "Union guys. Family men. Clowns who drive cement trucks for a living. Live in tract houses. Mow the lawn on Saturday mornings and sit in front of the TV all afternoon, watching the damn ball game and drinking beer." He hawked up a gob and spat it over the side.

It was the longest speech

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Keeler had heard out of Pine so far, and the first opinion he'd heard him voice. Keeler wondered if he were talking about his own father. It was hard to imagine a guy like Pine with a regular home life and a childhood. He'd probably been the kind of kid who shot at stray dogs with a BB gun.

"You'll have to forgive my partner, captain," Ventura said smoothly. "He's given to waxing a little wroth."

"I noticed," Keeler said. "Why don't we check out the diving equipment?"

"Capital notion," Ventura agreed.

Keeler led the way belowdecks, and Ventura followed him. Keeler had spare tanks and regulators for himself, but he'd taken Jimmy Ventura at his word and put down a deposit on the full rental complement. Ventura sat down on the forward bunk, picked up the regulator, and stripped it in straightforward fashion. Keeler would have done the same; it was like packing your own parachute. Ventura was practiced and professional, Keeler noticed. It struck him as another of those odd things that didn't quite fit. All that ripe good humor and bonhomie made Ventura seem like an amateur, but his concentration and the attention to detail made him seem like another kettle of fish altogether. Keeler wondered what he really did, in the so-called real world.

Ventura blew through the hoses. "This'll suit me fine," he announced cheerfully. "When do you want to start?"

"Let's get the gear on deck," Keeler suggested, hoisting his own tanks and starting for the gangway.

"Captain," Ventura called.

Keeler turned.

"It's not too late," Ventura said, smiling. "I'm still willing to split the take."

"You've already paid for the boat today," Keeler said. "You want to pay for it tomorrow, that's up to you." He went topside.

Cousin Andy was scraping the lunch dishes into the bait bucket. If they were going to dive, he wasn't about to put chum in the water to draw sharks. He glanced over at Keeler and sort of cocked his head. Keeler went and helped him pick up the plates. They took them below to the galley. Ventura had heaved his diving gear up onto the deck.

"I don't like it," Andy murmured to Keeler belowdecks.

"What's not to like, their manners?" Keeler grinned.

"Dey be some kind of pirates, mon," Andy confided. "De tall one, he carrying a pis-

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tol under his arm." Cousin Andy's eyes gleamed in the half-light.

"I believe it," Keeler said, sobering. "What about our other pal there, Ventura, the chunky one?"

"He stripping off his clothes," Andy shrugged. "Nothing to hide dere."

"Okay," Keeler said, considering. "You keep an eye on Pine. I think Ventura's the one to worry about, but he'll be underwater with me. Lot of room for accidents down there."

"That's what I mean," Andy said.

"I can take care of myself," Keeler said.

"See you do," Andy told him.

They stacked the dishes and went up on deck. There was a slight haze on the horizon to the south, making the light thicken a little, but no storm clouds. The seas had gone glassy and flat, and there was only a whisper of wind. The heat was getting oppressive. Keeler checked the barometer reading. It had fallen a point since daybreak, and the air felt heavy. He decided not to mention the falling barometer to his passengers.

"You have sonar, don't you?" Ventura asked him.

"Sure," Keeler said. He had radar for anything that broke water, and sonar for the reefs and the fish, along with LORAN for positions. The rest of it was experience, or instinct, or following your nose when the scent was right. It was strong in his nostrils now. He could smell it the way a shark could taste blood in the water, less than one part per thousand, they said.

"Let's bounce it off the bottom a little," Ventura said.

"No problem," Keeler said. He rode the boat up on her anchor and sent Cousin Andy forward to haul it in. Then they took a slow cruise back and forth, quartering the cove, and came up empty. Ventura suggested the north side. Pine went up into the bows, and Cousin Andy went below.

"I don't like guns on my boat," Keeler told Ventura.

"I don't blame you," Ventura said. "Still, you've got a 12-gauge over your head." He meant the shotgun Keeler carried in the wheelhouse, locked into a bracket.

"That's for sharks," Keeler said.

"What do you load, deer slugs?" Ventura asked. "Must be useful for stunning game fish alongside."

"Don't get off the subject," Keeler said.

Ventura shrugged. "All right," he said. "Let me lay my cards on the table, captain."

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"I'm not holding my breath," Keeler said.

Ventura laughed. "I mean, let's be as frank with one another as we can," he said. "Pine, see, he's my bodyguard."

"I figured as much," Keeler commented.

Ventura shook his head. "You don't understand," he told him, smiling. "Pine doesn't work for me."

It took Keeler a second or two to work it through. "You mean Pine's here to keep an eye on you," he said finally.

"I took you for a quick study, captain," Ventura said with an approving nod. "Suppose we just say I have business associates of an enterprising nature who entertain certain suspicions about me, and they're looking to protect their investment."

"Suppose we say that," Keeler said. "But if they don't trust you, why should I?"

"Because I'm going to make you rich," Ventura said.

Keeler looked at him. "That's probably exactly what you told them," he said.

"I probably did exactly that," Ventura said, grinning.

"What makes me different from them?" Keeler asked.

"You're here," Ventura said. "And they're not."

Keeler glanced toward the bow. "What about Pine, then?" he asked Ventura.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Ventura told him. He was gazing thoughtfully at Pine's back. "Three can keep a secret, if two of them are dead," he murmured.

Keeler shot him a sharp look.

Ventura shrugged, smiling. "You know who said that?" he inquired. "Benjamin Franklin."

"He must have been one cynical son of a bitch."

"Quite the ladies' man, too, I'm told," Ventura said. He looked at the fluorescent grass spiking on the sonar scope. "How good are you at the sonar signatures on your visual?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Can I tell the difference between a school of fish running close to the reef and the wreck of a sixteenth century sailing vessel? Sometimes," Keeler said. "I could probably pick up on something out of the ordinary, but that depends on what you're looking for."

"Something out of the ordinary," Ventura smirked.

"On the bottom?"

"Hopefully," Ventura said. "If it isn't, it's probably been picked clean already."

Keeler nodded, and Ventura left the wheelhouse to go forward. Keeler watched the sonar, but he kept an eye on the two men in the bow, leaning

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companionably over the rail. He catalogued the weapons at his and Andy's disposal. There was the 12-gauge, of course, and the flare pistol, and the spear guns below, one of them the old fashioned kind, with rubber elastics, that was a bitch to cock, the other fired by carbon dioxide cartridges. Keeler shook his head. Not much of an arsenal, he thought to himself. The only other arrow in his quiver was the weather. He checked the barometer for about the eighth time, and clocked the LORAN reading against the chart. It was more than a squall for sure now. A regular summer storm, piling up momentum as it shook the rain off its dreadlocks and hissed northwest across the Ragged Island archipelago and the Great Bahama Bank. Keeler had hopes it would pick up some speed. He was counting on a rough night at sea.

Cousin Andy joined him on the bridge. "She looking to blow," he remarked.

"She better," Keeler muttered.

"You got that right," Cousin Andy said.

Keeler glanced at him.

"It give us de advantage," Andy said, shrugging.

"We'll take whatever we can get," Keeler said.

"Well, mon, if we find nothing, we go home. No harm done, you know?"

Keeler was watching the sonar display again. "You mean, if we do spot something, we don't tell them about it? Just come up empty?"

"You asking my advice, now, cap'n?"

Keeler looked at him.

"My advice be we crack de tall one over de head with a Stillson wrench and leave him for de fish."

Keeler smiled. "You've got a bloody turn of mind this afternoon," he remarked.

Cousin Andy shrugged. "He do de same for us, we give him half de opportunity."

"We're probably in too deep already," Keeler said. "The time to think about getting rid of one or the other of them was back before lunch."

"De time to think about it was back on de dock," Andy commented.

"Yeah, you're right," Keeler said. He corrected the course to keep them on the edge of the dropoff. "But don't try anything, not without checking with me first. Maybe we can bluff it out."

"By den, it be too late, likely," Andy said.

"Okay," Keeler said. "Just make sure you hit him hard enough the first time. There won't be any second chance to

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sneak up on these guys."

"Oh, I hit him, he stay hit," Andy said solemnly.

"Well, maybe you'll get your chance when Ventura and I go over the side," Keeler said.

Andy glanced at him, frowning.

Keeler pointed at the sonar scope. "Moment of truth," he said. "We got something, but I don't know what."

"We just might want to see what dey after," Andy said speculatively.

"Yeah, we just might," Keeler said, smiling. He swung the bow around, and Andy started forward to set the anchor. Ventura and Pine turned to look at the wheelhouse as the boat came up into the wind and the engines slowed. Keeler waved them back to the bridge.

"What's up?" Ventura asked him.

"We've got a positive," Keeler told him. "You want to go down and have a look?"

"What is it?" Pine asked, squinting at the scope.

"Hard to tell," Keeler said. "Could be a wreck, could be eel grass."

"You're putting me on," Pine said.

"Yeah, I am a little," Keeler admitted. "I think it's a boat, or something like it. Something nature didn't put there anyway. Whether it's what you guys are looking for or not, I'm not in a position to say."

"Let's find out, then," Ventura said. He gestured at the diving gear on the afterdeck, and then looked at Keeler expectantly. "You coming along, captain?" he asked.

"I guess I am," Keeler said.

They went over the side into the cool, clear water. You could see straight to the bottom, fifty or a hundred feet down, and as a ray passed beneath them, its shadow traveled along the sand below it like a trailing hem. Off to their left, the reef plunged over the edge into the deeper trench of ocean, and the water shaded from a shimmery blue to a rich cobalt. Beyond that was a turbid darkness rich with plankton, the bottom too far below the surface for reflected light to bounce back. In those deeps, the big predators ranged, sometimes rising for a wounded fish thrashing in the shallow waters and then sinking back to lie in wait, cruising with a remorseless hunger, an angry metabolic engine, their sudden cold presence like a leathery premonition of death beside you. Up on the surface, Keeler reminded himself, there were only the two lateral dimensions, from side to side; under-

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water, there was yet a third, above and below, and you had to watch your back all the time. It took some getting used to.

They dropped past the lip of the trench. Ventura played his light over schools of fish, working his way along the reef face, ranging back and forth, keeping a steady pace and moving slowly into deeper water. He was a man in some kind of hurry, Keeler thought, but he wasn't careless. He knew what he was about as a diver, and Keeler had to respect that. Ventura paid close attention to what he was doing, and he made sure Keeler didn't lose him. In a different set of circumstances, he and Jimmy Ventura might have been, if not friends exactly, then drinking buddies, say, sharing their excitements and lying to each other about their finds, the brass fittings they could sell by the pound, the curiosities that could be worth more, to the right buyer. The difference was, Keeler felt, that in this case Ventura knew what he was looking for and it wasn't salvage, or not in the accepted sense. And so did somebody else. The question was whether Ventura would get there ahead of them. First come, first served. Finders, keepers. That's why the somebody else had sent a guard dog to look over Ventura's shoulder. They had an investment to protect, as Ventura had said.

It was Keeler who spotted it, and something turned over in the pit of his stomach when he did. It was something very close to panic. He had a sudden premonition of what Ventura was up to, as though the whole thing had been laid out before him like a hand of solitaire you knew you couldn't win without cheating. But then Ventura was right there at his elbow, and Ventura held all the cards. Keeler signaled. Ventura nodded. They swam closer, feathering the water with their flippers as if putting off the vertigo of discovery. Keeler had a knife strapped to his calf. He wondered how hard it would be to cut Ventura's air hoses, or his throat. Strike while the iron is hot, he thought, but the moment passed. He wasn't coldblooded enough. You should be tougher, he told himself. You should be able to kill a man when his back was turned. Ventura would do the same for you if he got the chance, and Ventura has more to lose. You're looking right at it, what he has to lose.

It was a downed airplane. Not any Beechcraft Bonanza, either, for some foolhardy yuppies from the mainland to goof around in, or your patched-up,

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one-lung island-hopper, with funky props and sprung pontoons and chicken feathers stuck to the seats inside the cabin, but a corporate jet with twin engines. It was a Gulfstream, and there was a company logo stenciled on the fuselage, white on a dark background.

Ventura gestured Keeler closer and went in with the light. He flashed it in the cockpit, and they could see the pilot's body. Ventura looked across at Keeler and shook his head. Keeler didn't get it. Ventura didn't think the guy was going to be alive, did he? Ventura shook his head more vigorously, and pointed toward the surface. Then, in succession, he put his hands over his ears, he covered his eyes, and put a finger up to his mask, as if to his lips. Keeler understood. Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil. He nodded, but not in agreement.

There was a tremor in the water behind them, more sensed than felt, but Ventura's eyes widened. Keeler let himself go slack and sank slightly as he turned, tucking his head down, bringing his knees up against his body, and keeping his movements slow. He braced his hands against the airplane to push off if he had to. It was a tiger shark some eighteen feet long and closer than he had to be. Keeler had never seen one that big, or one that was so close, all at the same time. His scrotum tightened, but the shark was just taking a sniff and ducked away like a skittish shadow. Keeler saw him take up station some thirty feet away and begin to prowl in a slow circle.

They made their way in stages to the surface, Keeler keeping Ventura back, not just because of the bends but so they wouldn't spook the shark, either. They broke water just behind the stern.

Ventura shoved Keeler roughly out of the way so he could get up the ladder first. He stripped his mask off his face, and Cousin Andy helped him off with his tanks as Keeler clambered aboard.

Ventura spat over the side. "It's a goddamn dry hole," he said to Pine, breathing heavily.

"What do you mean?" Pine asked him.

"There's nothing down there," Ventura said. "Whatever we saw on the sonar, it's not what we're looking for."

Pine looked at Keeler.

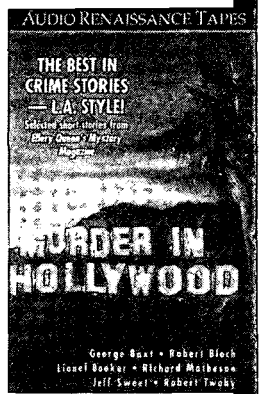
Keeler shook his head. "I didn't see anything down there I'm interested in," he said.

"Aside from a goddamn shark the size of the New York Public Library," Ventura mut-

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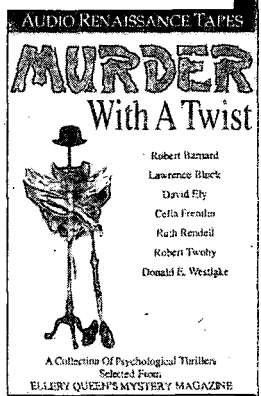
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tered. He swung around. "What the hell was that thing anyway?" he asked Keeler.

"Tiger shark," Keeler said. "Not all that common, but nothing to fool around with. Reef sharks, duskies, blacktips, blues, you see them all the time. A tiger shark can be dangerous. They'll snap at anything, especially if it's injured."

"Tiger shark eat a dog, mon," Cousin Andy commented.

"Nuts," Pine said. "I've had it up to here with this Amos 'n' Andy crap. You're supposed to know where to goddamn *look,*" he barked at Ventura. "We're not supposed to be out here on some jive-ass boat, jerking our chain."

Keeler shrugged out of his tanks and into a sweater. He sat down against the gunwale and kicked out of his flippers. "You want to get under way?" he asked Ventura.

"Might as well," Ventura said wearily.

Keeler knew it for a fake. "Straighten out the cabin," he said to Cousin Andy, getting to his feet.

He started forward for the wheelhouse.

Andy gave him a quick look and went below.

"Wait a minute there, skipper," Pine said. "You don't skate out of this that easy."

"Aw, Jesus," Keeler heard Ventura say. "Put that thing away."

"Shut the hell up," Pine said to Ventura.

Keeler turned around.

Pine had a gun in his hand. He looked at Keeler. The gun was a revolver with a short barrel, maybe four inches. A heavy-framed Colt or Smith, Keeler guessed. He figured Pine for the kind of guy who carried a .44 Magnum, or anyway something big enough to stop a Greyhound bus.

"This just ain't the kind of thing where you can take shortcuts," Ventura said to Pine, trying to sound reasonable. "You're stepping on your own tail here. You got no reason to piss off the captain. Think about it. Don't be such a hard-ass. Put the gun away."

"I thought I told you to shut the hell up," Pine said.

Ventura shrugged. "That's right," he said. "That's what you told me." He leaned back and eased off his flippers and wiggled his toes, examining them from a careful distance with his head cocked at an angle, as if they were no longer a part of his body.

"Come over here," Pine said to Keeler. He wasn't pointing the gun at him, but Keeler went anyway. "Tell me something," Pine said. "If you two didn't find anything, how come

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you were only down there for maybe ten minutes at most? And don't tell me you couldn't dive for longer."

"Aw, hell, I told you about the goddamn shark," Ventura said tiredly.

"I'm asking you, sport," Pine said to Keeler.

"Mr. Ventura was scared by a shark," Keeler said. "Me too, as a matter of fact." He glanced at Ventura. "We would have come topside pretty soon anyway, even if we hadn't already found the wreck." He smiled at Pine, then.

Pine gave a disgusted look, put a hand on his chest, and pushed him away. "You rat," he said to Ventura.

Ventura grinned at him. "You say that like it's a bad thing," he said. "You know you got to give with the one hand to get with the other."

"Don't give me that cop crap, you son of a bitch," Pine said. "I don't need that cheap psychology, messing with my head. You made a deal. Now you've made a different deal? Okay, I got a deal for you. Me or the fish." He stuck the gun in Ventura's face. The gun was cocked.

Keeler moved back. Pine flipped his eyes at him, and his finger tightened on the trigger. Ventura flinched. Cousin Andy appeared in the doorway to the cabin. He had one of the speareguns in his hands, the one with the rubber bands. Pine swung around. Andy shot him with the speargun. The barbed spear chunked into the meat of Pine's thigh. He grunted and snapped off a shot. The slug caught Andy in the upper body and slammed him back down the gangway in a tangle of arms and legs. Keeler launched himself at Pine, grabbing his wrist and tugging the muzzle of the gun up into the air. The back of Pine's knees caught on the gunwale, and they went over the side together, tumbling into the water, Keeler on top.

The cold water was a shock, going in again so fast after the sun had warmed his skin, and the soggy sweater hampered his movements. Pine fired the gun again underwater, and the round chugged out of the barrel in a spit of bubbles but spent itself immediately. Keeler pushed Pine down, kicking hard. He had one hand on Pine's wrist and the other around his throat. He let go as he brought his legs up, planting his feet on Pine's chest and thrusting him away, everything in slow motion. The blood seeped from Pine's leg in a cloudy spiral, sluggish and diffused. Keeler thrashed for the surface and came up for air as Pine broke water a couple of

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yards away, shaking the hair out of his eyes and trying to bring the gun to bear. Keeler gulped air and dived again, scooping himself down from the bright surface with his hands, his arms weary. He went underneath the hull and came up again at the bow, his lungs bursting. He could hear Pine cursing, and two more shots went off. One of them hit the hull, above the waterline. The second one whined off toward the sky.

Keeler grabbed for the anchor line, fending himself off the swinging boat, and hung there, treading water. He heard Pine shout again but wordlessly, the pitch of his voice rising from angry outrage to a sudden childish fear. Keeler pulled himself around under the bows, ducking out from cover to see what was going on, although he guessed. Pine was flailing toward the boat, splashing like a wounded fish. Wrong profile, Keeler thought. He pulled his legs up against his body and hugged the boat.

The shark had come up from deeper water like a ghost, nudging Pine from underneath the ways sharks will, teasing, testing gently for a reaction from crippled prey. Pine was still a good ten feet away from the boat. The shark swung back and hit, this time with his jaws. Pine gurgled and went under and came up again screaming, windmilling his arms in wild circles, and the shark ploughed into him amidships, taking a piece out of the soft flesh below his ribs. Keeler scrambled up the side of the boat, getting out of the water as fast as he could. He clambered over the rail and sprawled on the foredeck, exhausted.

Pine was still screaming. Keeler got heavily to his feet and staggered toward the wheelhouse where he kept the shotgun. There wasn't much chance he could save Pine, but there was a slim one if he could drive the shark off. The window of opportunity was closing fast. Keeler stopped, his breathing ragged. He was dripping water on the deck.

Jimmy Ventura sat on the cushions on the port side, the 12-gauge pump gun cradled in his arms. He glanced briefly at Keeler and went back to watching the struggle in the water.

"Jesus," Keeler said. "Use the goddamn gun."

Ventura grinned. "I was afraid I'd hit the shark," he said cheerfully.

"You son of a bitch," Keeler said, starting for him.

Ventura moved the muzzle of the shotgun in Keeler's direction.

"Hold still there, captain," he

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said. "Let's just see how this plays out." He was still smiling. "Hell, this is better than Jacques Cousteau," he remarked.

Pine had stopped screaming. Keeler looked overboard, his skin clammy and chilled, and realized he was trembling like a luffing sail. Pine was no longer floundering. His arms moved feebly. If he was even still alive, the movement came from his autonomic nervous system. The shark had very nearly severed his trunk. Pine's pelvis and legs twitched at right angles to his chest and arms. The big fish was taking his time, now, the first voracious frenzy over with, and he was sure of his feeding, moving in almost thoughtfully to rip a chunk out here and there. Pine's skin gleamed whitely in the water, half-submerged, his limbs tugged back and forth as the shark took another taste. Keeler could see the smaller scavengers beginning to circle already, waiting for their big brother to have his fill and leave what was left of the carcass for them. He saw a dogfish dart in boldly and tear away a piece of flesh. He turned and vomited salt water over the combing. He felt weak, and he was shaking uncontrollably.

Keeler shucked his wet sweater off and dropped it in a sodden lump on the deck. He didn't bother to look at Ventura again. He went below to have a look at Andy.

The bullet had taken Andy up under the left collarbone and gone straight through, missing his lung and the aorta but leaving a nasty exit wound, a shredded hole below his shoulder, with bone fragments stuck to the edges of his torn shirt like chips of rock salt. There was a lot of blood. The cabin floor was slippery with it. Keeler stuffed a towel behind Andy's back and made up a compress to press against the wound in front.

"You get him?" Andy whispered.

"Shark got him," Keeler said. "I helped."

"Dat one bad motherhumper," Andy said. "I hope he rot in hell."

"What's left of him," Keeler said, working to close off the bleeding. "Stop talking."

"We a long way from George Town," Andy said. "I somehow misdoubt we gone make it."

"New Providence or Andros is closer," Keeler said. "We can get to a hospital there, or an airfield."

"Don't be a fool," Andy said. "De weather blow up, we neither one of us have a chance. What about de other one?"

"He's topside, watching his

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friend feed the fish," Keeler said. "He won't give me any trouble."

"You lying to me, mon," Andy said.

"Does more good than harm," Keeler said, smiling.

"You watch your step," Andy wheezed. "Dat mon kill you, easy as he break wind."

"You let me worry about Ventura," Keeler said.

Andy smiled with an effort. "Oh, I'm not worried about you, mon," he said, wincing as he shifted his shoulder. "I worried about me."

"You should be," Keeler said. "Lie still." He went up on deck.

Ventura was watching the water reflectively, but he wasn't about to let Keeler catch him by surprise. He shifted the shotgun in his lap. "It's pretty amazing," he said with a quick smile. "The ecosystem, I mean. Old Pine there, he supplies all the basic nutrients."

"Crabs'll get what's left," Keeler said.

"I'll remember that, next time I'm cracking crab claws and drinking beer out of a pitcher in some joint on the Keys, south of Miami," Ventura said. "It might serve to keep me humble, knowing what I know now."

"Something should," Keeler said.

"You've got the right idea about me, captain," Ventura said easily. "You don't waste any time."

"We don't have much time," Keeler said. "My bait man's going to bleed to death if we don't get moving."

"Well, now you're fudging the issue, captain," Ventura said. "Your bait man's an unnecessary encumbrance, and so are you, come to think of it." He moved the shotgun comfortably.

"Look at the sky," Keeler said.

Ventura cast a glance over his shoulder. "Getting dark, is it? Usually does about this time. Don't screw with me, Keeler. You can't talk your way out of this one. Don't try to con a con artist, that's what they say."

"How are you going to get back to port?" Keeler asked. "And how are you going to find this place again?"

"I can steer a straight course," Ventura said. "And as for finding this place, hell, I've got the lock on your LORAN punched into the log."

Keeler shook his head. "You're overestimating your abilities," he said.

Ventura took the shotgun off safety. "You're the one who's overestimating his usefulness, captain," he said. "You don't have a pot to piss in."

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"Check it out, Jimmy," Keeler said. "Look at the color of the sky, there on the horizon. See that yellow burn off to the southeast? We'll have rough weather by nightfall, and you'll need me at the wheel to ride it out."

"You're just talking to stay alive," Ventura said. He shrugged. "I'd do the same in your place. In fact, I have. And look where it's got me."

"Look again," Keeler said. "You see any fishing boats out there? They've all hightailed it for home. And we have to head for some sheltered anchorage. There's not that much available. Closest harbor is Shroud Cay, thirty miles to the northeast, and that's no more than a ring of coral. You try it yourself, you'll tear the bottom out of the boat if the storm doesn't sink you first."

Ventura nodded. "You talked me into it," he said. He grinned, pointing the shotgun up in the air and snapping the safety on. "But don't press your luck. You're just buying yourself some time."

Keeler shook his head. "I'm saving your life," he said.

"You're saving your skin," Ventura said. "Mine's only incidental." He shot Keeler his maddening grin. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I won't hold it against you."

The storm came up fast out of the south, riding the warmer ocean currents north and blowing fierce across the flat water between them and the Greater Antilles, picking up speed off the Cuban coastline and funneling into the shallow slot that paved the way toward Nassau. The waves whipped themselves into a high rolling boil. *Siren* bucked in the following sea, shuddering as the high water hit her astern and slithering across the troughs of the waves as Keeler ran before the wind at full power, the props rising clear of the water on the crests. He could have headed her up, bow into the wind, to keep her from swamping, but he had no faith she could ride it out in this weather, and he hoped to find an anchorage before the boat broke up or sank. They were taking a lot of water, the seas running green over the gunwales and sluicing out the scuppers. The pumps were laboring belowdecks, but he could hear them falter, choking and then catching again, and it scared him. If the engines failed, their goose was cooked for fair. He tried not to let it show, but he didn't have much choice. In these heavy seas, they'd go down like a bag of marbles.

"Are you crazy?" Ventura

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howled at him, hanging onto the wheelhouse supports for dear life.

They slammed into the next wave, the bow going under for a moment before *Siren* shook it off, righting herself again. Keeler clung to the helm grimly, trying to hold the boat to a steady course and keep her from swinging broadside to the waves. Salt water stung his eyes, and his arms were cramped. He couldn't see anything on the radar in this turbulence. They had to trust to luck he wouldn't run them aground, if he could even raise a landfall in the gathering darkness before the storm got on top of them with its full strength. He wanted to tell Ventura that this was nothing compared to what they could expect if they were caught out on the open water with a force ten gale bearing down on them. Of course, it was already bearing down on them, and they were still in open water. Dense streaks of foam blew off the waves in the direction of the wind, and the sea looked white all the way to the horizon, not that you could make out any horizon. The rain came down in greasy sheets, rattling against the windscreen and the canopy like BB's. The visibility was down to no more than a couple of boatlengths, and what little light was left was failing fast.

"You son of a bitch, you're going to drown us," Ventura yelled, trying to keep his footing. He was holding onto a stanchion with one hand, swaying back and forth as the deck pitched. He still had the shotgun clutched in the other.

Keeler didn't have time to argue the point. He shook salt spray out of his eyes and squinted forward, across the heaving bows. There were no lights at Shroud Cay and no harbor at all to speak of, just a shallow bight in the shoulder of coral that broke the surface at high water. He thought he heard a change in the shape and sound of the seas. It might have been the hiss and boom of surf off the reef, but he couldn't throttle back to listen without the onrushing waves coming over the stern and sinking them. He ploughed ahead, unable to see much more than a few feet in front of them but straining to hear something against the wind and the waves and the crushing rain. There it was again, and closer.

"Get up in the bow," he bellowed at Ventura.

"In a pig's eye," Ventura hollered back.

"Take the goddamn wheel, then," Keeler yelled. He stepped to one side, away from

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the helm, and Ventura lurched across the wheelhouse to grab at it. "Watch me," Keeler shouted in his ear. "Swing it hard, whichever way I point."

Ventura stared at him, terrified.

"If I put both my arms out and then drop them, ease back on the throttles, but don't kill the engines."

Ventura swallowed hard and nodded.

Keeler gave him a quick, hard grin and ducked out from the shelter of the wheelhouse into the open.

It was like walking into a wall. He went into a crouch and scrabbled for a handhold as a solid wave of green water came over the bows and pounded the superstructure, drenching him, but he hung on. Then he began to work his way forward on his hands and knees, the deck slick and the fierce wind tearing at his wet clothes. The boat was shuddering up and down its whole length, like a big shaggy dog trying to shake the water out of its coat. Salt spray stung his eyes, and the deck heaved and rolled, throwing him off balance. He barked his shins on the anchor chain and then used it to get a purchase with his feet. He couldn't stand up, but he was able to raise his upper body into the wind, keeping one hand on the combing and the other held fast to a storage locker. Another huge wave crashed over the bows as they plunged, and Keeler flattened himself against the foredeck. It almost broke him loose, but the bow reared up again, and so did he, rubbing a hand over his face and trying to see ahead with bloodshot, ragged eyes. Dead in front he could just make out the line of surf, not the white froth of wind-blown ocean, but the churning water breaking across a reef. He flung his left arm straight out, hoping Ventura could read the signal and bring the helm over. *Siren* heeled suddenly and wallowed in the troughs of the swell, and the engines growled under strain. She jumped forward and then careened sickeningly as the seas creased under her beam and nearly rolled her over. Keeler grabbed for something with his left hand and shot his right arm out. Ventura swung the helm again, and the boat responded sluggishly. Keeler sympathized. He was ready to give it up himself. The reef was closer now, but he could just make out a break in the surf. He stumbled back toward the wheelhouse. Ventura was doing his best to steer a steady course, but the boat was side-slipping, losing power as she skidded along the leeward side of an advancing swell.

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Keeler hauled himself around and halfway fell into the cockpit.

"Starboard," he croaked at Ventura. "Hard starboard."

Ventura brought the helm over again. He had both hands on the wheel now, the shotgun sliding around on the deck, and the whites of his eyes glared at Keeler in the near darkness. His face was set and scared.

Keeler dragged himself to his feet and took the wheel, jamming both throttles against the stops, praying for the last surge of power, and spun the wheel to port. They yawed wide, and the stern slalomed, but the screws bit in and Keeler brought her back to starboard, the wind right behind them and the heavy seas clawing up their backs, and *Siren* plunged through the foaming gap in the reef into slack water. Keeler brought the wheel over hard, throttling back on the engines, port ahead half-full, the starboard screw idling at quarter-speed, bringing the boat head up into the wind. It was slack water only by comparison with the seas outside the reef. They were still to windward of Shroud Cay, and there were whitecaps inside the anchorage.

Keeler eased both of his engines ahead, holding the boat steady, and went forward to set the bow anchor. He used a lot of line, wanting *Siren* to swing as much as she had to at anchor. He returned to the wheelhouse to back the engines off and found Ventura sitting in the corner with the shotgun in his lap.

"Jesus," Ventura said, looking up at him glassy-eyed. "You've got a pair of brass balls, skipper."

And a heart to match, Keeler thought to himself, looking sidelong at the shotgun and narrowing his gaze.

"You were right about one thing," Ventura said. "I wouldn't have made it without you." He took a slug of whisky from Keeler's bottle, wiped the neck, and put the cap back on. He leaned over and set it on the cushions where Keeler wouldn't have any trouble reaching it. "I've really got to hand it to you, captain. You're a man who knows what he's doing."

Keeler wiped the glistening sweat off Cousin Andy's face and said nothing. He didn't know much about shock, but he figured Andy was going into it. Keeler had his sleeping bag tucked in around Andy's lower body, and he was wondering if whisky would do Andy any

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damage, if Andy would even come around at all and could get some down. The bleeding hadn't entirely stopped, but it was a slow seepage, not arterial. Keeler had changed the dressing twice now. He didn't know what else to do for him.

"That was some performance all right," Ventura went on. "I sure as hell couldn't have done it." He'd recovered his good humor somewhat, now they were safe, or safe enough, for the moment.

They were belowdecks. The boat was rocking, sawing at the anchor line in the wind and the rolling ocean. Keeler had checked his fuel levels and decided to leave the engines idling. He wanted to keep the pumps going, for one thing, and the cabin lights, and didn't want to draw on the reserve batteries. He couldn't feature trying to restart those big Bertrams in wet weather if the wind shifted into another quarter and the storm didn't subside. He cocked his head, listening for a change, but it was only the barometric pressure taking a deep breath and then it was back, the wind moaning in the stanchions and the thick seas chopping at the hull. Rain and windblown spray spattered the decks overhead, rattling on the superstructure. He could hear the creak of the bow lines straining, and knew the anchor was dragging. He stood up.

Ventura was suddenly alert, shifting the shotgun across his knees.

"I'm going topside," Keeler told him. "You want to come along?"

Ventura shrugged and followed him up the companionway.

It was still blowing, and full dark. Keeler checked the engine revolutions, and went forward to snug the bow lines. He could ride up on the anchor and take in the slack, but the more line he had out, the better off they'd be, unless they pulled completely free of the sandy bottom and got blown into the reef. He gave some attention to the radar, but the scud and clutter made it impossible to read. Still, he thought he might be picking something up to the west. He went and stared into the gloom with his naked eye, but couldn't see anything through the rain. Then he saw what he thought might be a distress flare. He went back into the shelter of the wheelhouse and broke out the Very pistol, loading a magnesium flare. He went back to the rail, cocking the pistol and peering into the darkness.

"Hold on there, skipper," Ventura said. "What are you up to?"

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"There's a boat out there somewhere," Keeler said. He raised his arm to fire the flare gun aloft. "She'll never be able to find her way in here in the dark."

"You light that off, I'll blow you right over the side," Ventura said, steadying the muzzle of the shotgun. It was pointed at the small of Keeler's back.

"Damn it all, you can't leave a vessel in distress, not in this kind of weather," Keeler protested.

"Put it away," Ventura said. He didn't sound like he'd be amenable to argument.

Keeler went back to the wheel and locked the Very pistol into the overhead clip. He left it cocked.

"You're a real bastard, you know that, Jimmy?" he remarked.

"I've been told that before, believe it or not," Ventura said, smiling. "Let's go below, skipper. I think you might be letting this weather get on your nerves."

Keeler went back down the gangway, Ventura with the pump gun at his back. Keeler was visibly seething. Maybe that's what he wanted Ventura to see, that his anger might be making him careless. Or maybe he was past caring.

They spent a restless night. The wind was fretful, the rain lashing at the portholes, and Ventura was too suspicious to sleep. Keeler stayed on the floor, hunkered down next to Andy, checking his vital signs for any shift in temperature or mood and mopping his forehead. Andy was feverish now and quaking with chills. Keeler felt helpless, watching him. He'd changed Andy's dressings again, but the cushions were getting soggy with blood. Keeler didn't think Andy was going to make it. He wasn't sure he was going to make it himself. Ventura watched him from the opposite bunk, his eyes wary and hooded, like a hawk's.

He must have dozed off. He woke up with a start. There was silence, and the half-light of an early dawn leaked through the curtained portholes. Ventura was gone. Keeler heard him moving around on deck. He got to his feet slowly, like an old man, his joints creaking. He looked down at Andy. Andy was still alive, but his breathing was shallow, whispering and labored. Keeler felt his forehead. Andy's brow was cool and dry, as if he'd passed some crisis, and Keeler hoped he had. He went up on deck.

The storm had passed and the day was going to be clear. Ventura was in the stern, looking off toward the horizon. He

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seemed rested, or resigned to something. Keeler was.

He realized the engines were down. He started for the hatch, but Ventura stopped him. "It's all right," Ventura said, "I shut 'em off."

"Why?" Keeler asked him.

"I checked your fuel," Ventura said. "I wanted to be sure I could make it back to port. Wouldn't want to be stuck out here. I've got too much to lose."

Keeler turned and went back to the wheelhouse and started the engines. They stuttered a couple of times and then caught. He read the fuel gauges. "You've got a range of about a hundred nautical miles, in any direction you choose," he said to Ventura. "What'll it be?"

"Might as well be Nassau," Ventura said indifferently. "How's the patient?"

"He's doing as well as can be expected," Keeler said.

"That's good," Ventura said. "I'd like to see him last right up until I pull into the dock. Fewer questions that way. Of course, I might have to pull off the dressings, let him bleed down a little before I get there."

"Innocent victim of a shoot-out?" Keeler suggested.

"Something like that," Ventura said. "I can explain Mr. Pine. I need some kind of alibi to explain you, skipper."

"How come I didn't come back with the boat?"

"Exactly."

"You can tell them I was in it with Pine," Keeler said.

"I was thinking somewhat along those lines myself."

"What's your story, Jimmy?" Keeler asked. "I heard Pine tell you he didn't want to hear that cop crap from you. So what's the story? Dade Metro? DEA gone bad?"

Ventura smiled and looked down at the shotgun, turning it over carefully in his hands. Then he looked up at Keeler. "You're not too slow, are you, skipper? I like that in you. I'm sorry it has to be this way."

"What's in the downed airplane, then?" Keeler asked. "Incriminating documents? Something that links you to drug traffic? Or is it industrial espionage? I saw the corporate insignia on the side of the aircraft. And your friend Pine, or the people he represents, I'm surprised they didn't send a guy with better resources, or at least more finesse."

Ventura shook his head and smiled. "You're making it too complicated," he said almost sadly.

"Cocaine," Keeler said. "It's a planeload of dope."

Ventura shook his head again. "I'll make it simple," he said. "It's a planeload full of

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money," he said. "Three million dollars in cold, hard cash. Undeclared and untraceable. Mob money, headed for the Bahamas to be laundered."

"But the plane went down."

"Yeah. It wasn't coming in, it was going out. Coming in, that's a raft of trouble."

"How'd you get onto it?" Keeler wanted to know.

"I used to work for DEA, back in Miami. We cooperate with the Coast Guard, or the other way around. Anyway, we've been tracking these guys, trying to pick up the paper trail, follow the money, see where it goes. We lost track of this one, and so did they."

"Because it was going out, not coming in."

"You're a quick study, you are," Ventura said, smiling. "Difference is, I knew where the plane went down."

"But you didn't know what was in it," Keeler said. "Not until they told you."

"That's about right," Ventura said.

"So you made a deal," Keeler said. "For what? Half?"

"Seemed fair at the time," Ventura said.

"You could give it up," Keeler said. "Go back, show them what you've found. Lay your cards on the table, so to speak."

"I guess I could at that," Ventura said, as if he were thinking it over. "On the other hand, three million bucks. It's easy to disappear with three million bucks."

"It's not that easy," Keeler said.

"Oh, I'm willing to give it a shot," Ventura remarked. He smiled, almost regretfully. "I've come this far." He shifted his weight on the stern boards, making himself comfortable, like a yachtsman getting ready to shoot skeet, and swung the shotgun down with a lazy motion. He snapped the safety off. "It's been real, captain," he said.

The engines were thrumming. Keeler jammed the throttles up to full, rocketing the boat forward. He had a firm grip on the wheelhouse stanchions with one hand. Ventura toppled backwards over the stern, and the shotgun went off into the air. Keeler jerked the throttles back, stopping the boat dead in the water. He tugged the flare gun out of its clip over his head and went aft.

Ventura was struggling in the water about twenty feet back. The shotgun had gone down into the deeps. Ventura righted himself and swam for the boat with careful, easy strokes. Keeler let him get up to the stern and put his hands on the ladder. Ventura started to heave his body out of the water. Keeler put the Very pistol

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into his face and shot him with it. Ventura shrieked, letting go of the ladder and putting his hands over his eyes. The flare went off, searing his hands, and Ventura fell back astern with a sudden splash, beating back the heat. Water gurgled in his open throat as he thrashed and sank and rose again, rolling in the water. The bloom of the flare kept burning, above or below the surface, it made no difference, and Keeler had to turn away. It was brighter than a full moon reflected on still water like a disc of light.

He went forward again and goosed the engines, moving up on the anchor, and then held the boat steady while he drew up the line. He kept his back turned to the soundless cries, and the burbling, and then at last the silence. He finally got the anchor free and the line coiled as carefully as he could, thinking of nothing but coiling the line properly and stowing the gear.

He went below. Andy slept fitfully, his chest rising and falling with a wet, hollow sound, like a man with damp lungs, or a hole in them. Keeler touched his skin. It told him nothing. Keeler went topside again and stood at the wheel. He sniffed the wind. It smelled of daybreak, clean and fresh. He wanted the morning to catch in his throat, the way it did when he was up at dawn and everything seemed new. The taste in his mouth was of ashes. He nudged the throttles half ahead and pointed the boat out through the reef. Once in open water he pushed the engines up to full power and headed for home.

The sun was just clearing the eastern edge of the world, and the light glanced off the water in a silvery glare. He was exhausted. He didn't want Andy to die. He thought maybe it was time to sell the goddamn boat.

The sea was like glass, as if the storm had never been or, in passing, had smoothed the ocean like clay. The light of the new day was blinding. It seemed almost to pierce his heart. It always had. It made him very nearly giddy, and his spirits lifted as the boat bounced along the glassy sea, just like a skipping stone. He told himself that Cousin Andy was a tough old bird, that he'd pull through. Keeler hoped so. He wanted Andy to live long enough to help him spend the money. Keeler didn't think he could spend three million all by himself.

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UNSOLVED
by Walter Shepherd

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the April issue.

An English prisoner had once escaped from the old fortress of Casava by picking a number of locks, and this so enraged Don Miguel Montojo that he built a new castle in the form of a maze. When he threw Sir Roger de Cleverly into the central dungeon, he defied him to escape even though there was not a single door in the whole place.

As a matter of fact there were no fewer than twelve ways out, but Sir Roger was unable to discover this useful fact without a plan. Nevertheless, on one of his futile wanderings he passed near a guardroom where he overheard a conversation. One of the guards was explaining to a novice the clue to the surest—though not the shortest—way of escape, and Sir Roger lost no time in putting his information to practical use.

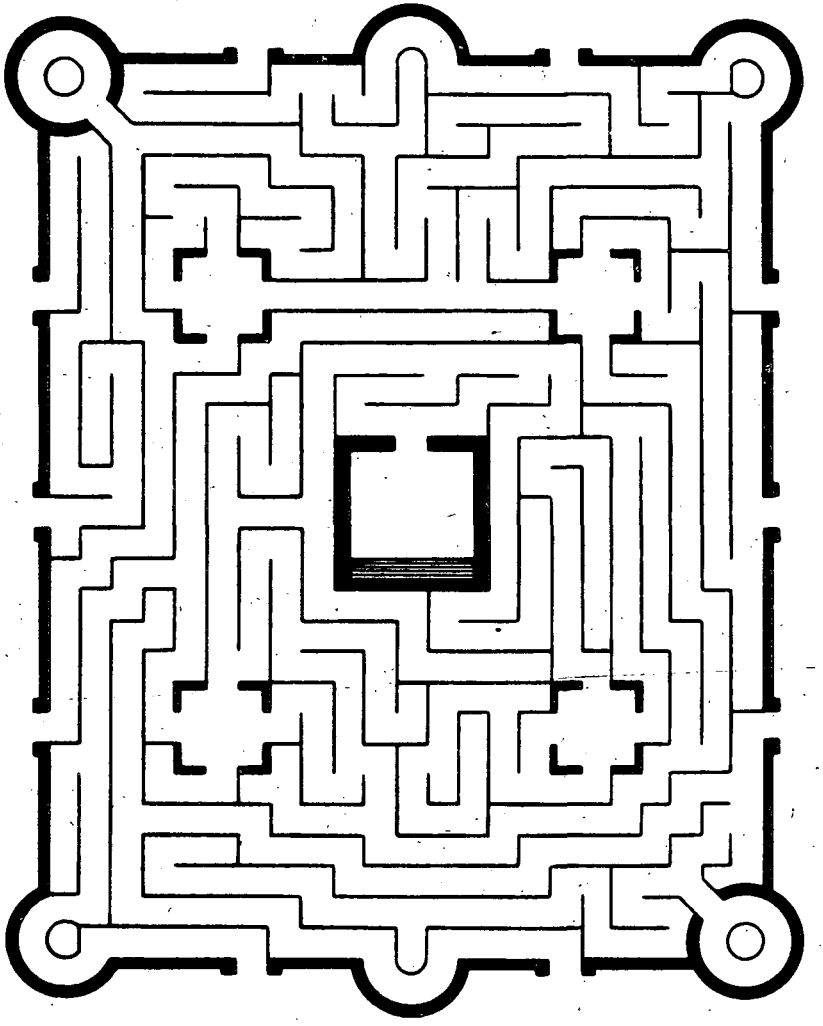
What was the clue?

Hint: Make note of the turnings—"left, left, right, left," etc., till you spot a system.

See page 149 for the solution to the February puzzle.

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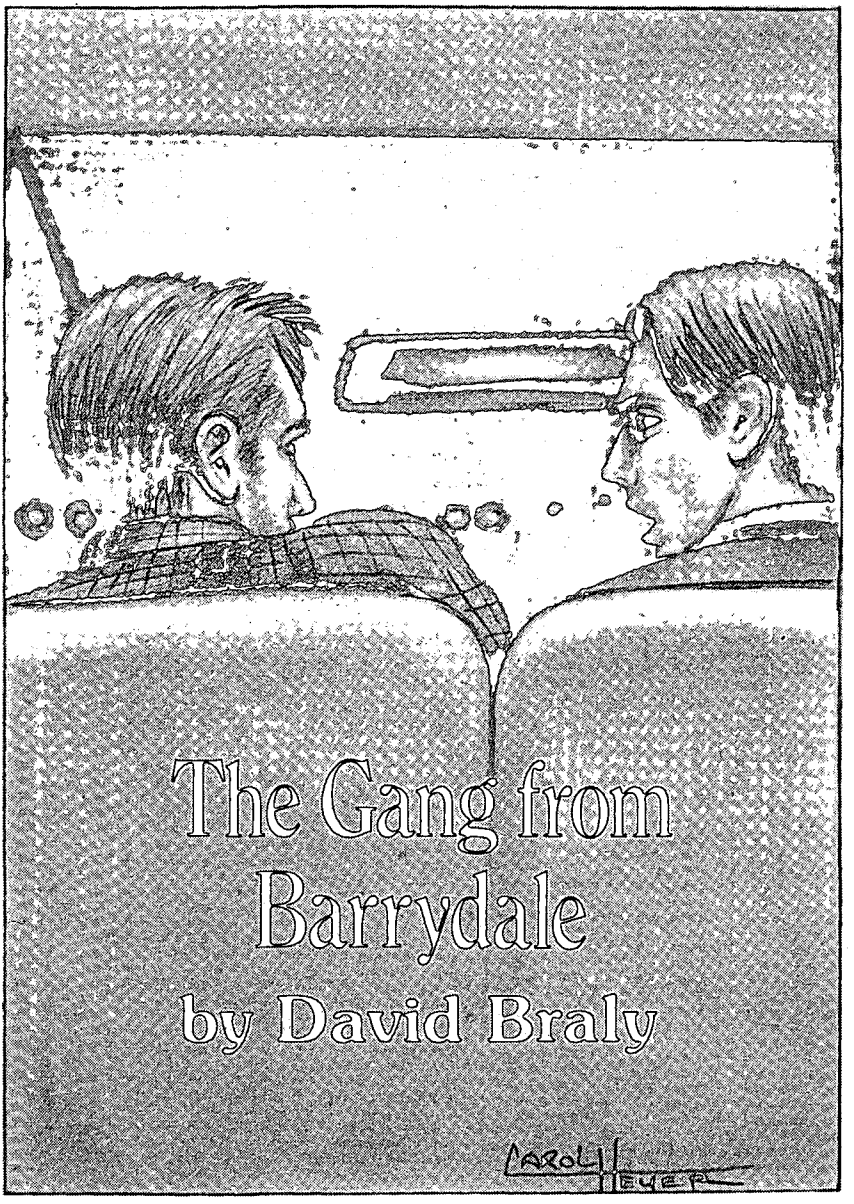


Illustration by Carol Heyer

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'Twas to be a perfect crime. 'Course, every crime that's planned is planned to be a perfect crime by them who planned it. But Ernie Mohan was sure this truly would be a perfect crime, and he it was who planned it.

Mohan was a redhaired, ashen-faced lad of eighteen, Tony Comecci and Roger Milwater each a year younger. They had begun their criminal activities five years earlier, shoplifting in the small stores of Barrydale and later stealing bikes from front yards at night and property left in the seats of unlocked cars. Most Barrydale cars were unlocked. The town of seven thousand, snug against the Cascade Mountains of Oregon, was a safe and peaceful community, despite the activities of Mohan and his pals.

Alas, Mohan wanted more. Never caught by a copper or a victim, he believed that he had a certain talent for what he grandiosely described as "underworld activities." Now, it is a common belief of all small town toughs that they would be just as tough anywhere as in their small town. Tell a high school bully in Breckenridge, Texas, or Mooresville, North Carolina, or, yes, Barrydale, Oregon, that he would not be just as feared by classmates in a public school in New York City, Chicago, or Los Angeles, and he will be indignant and unbelieving. Not until he reaches reform school or prison and meets some of the city boys will he recognize the difference. And so it was with Ernie, who not only believed that he was as tough as anyone else, but also believed that his long, successful record of petty thefts signaled a criminal genius at least equal to that of the man who fixed the 1919 World Series.

"You should never steal where you live," Ernie sagely told Tony and Roger after watching the movie *Harry in Your Pocket,* blissfully ignoring the fact that he had been doing exactly that for five years. "When we pull off our first really big job, it's gotta be someplace distant."

Only one place in Oregon was worthy of Ernie's criminal talents, and that of course was Portland. There he hoped to live someday, the criminal mastermind of the city of rain the way Moriarty had been in the city of fog.

After graduation from high school, Ernie drove his four-year-old Rabbit to Portland to "case a score."

What he eventually found was a fast food joint on Southeast 122nd Avenue. Popular

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with cruising teenagers, it took in money all day and especially all evening before closing at eleven P.M. By clandestinely watching the place for a week (Ernie understood that even criminal geniuses had to be thorough about such things), he determined that the store's daily "take" was deposited at ten A.M. That meant that the entire income of the day and evening remained in the cash register overnight.

Ernie explained to Tony and Roger the plan, and very planned out was the plan. They would pull up behind the store at midnight, turn off their lights, go to the store, and—

No, not try to *quietly* burglarize it.

Ernie might be a small town boy, but he was no fool. He had watched every episode of *Adam-12*. While stores in Barrydale did not have burglar alarms, a store in Portland certainly would.

They would bust in, break open the cash register, run out, and drive onto Southeast 122nd. A snatch and run job, Ernie called it. And Southeast 122nd was one of the main north-south streets in Portland, still brisk with traffic at midnight. They would blend in with all the other cars quickly, before "the fuzz" arrived at the burger joint. By the time any sort of dragnet was laid, they would be on the highway to Gresham on their way home to Barrydale.

They chose a warm summer night for their score. The sky was overcast, but there was no rain. Teenagers were cruising Southeast 122nd the way they did whenever the police were not there in force to hassle them.

Ernie drove behind the burger joint at midnight and found the parking lot empty. He cut the lights, waited a minute to get up his courage, and then led his gang to the target. A jack handle got them inside the building and the cash register both, while the burglar alarm clanged like twenty schoolbells. They retrieved about a hundred dollars from the cash register. 'Twas Roger who spotted the safe embedded in the wall. They ran out cursing and swearing, hopped into the Rabbit, and turned into the traffic on Southeast 122nd Avenue.

"A safe!" screamed Tony. "Why didn't you know there was a safe?"

"Hey, I didn't wanna be known there," said Ernie, keeping his eyes on the street ahead. "I only cased the inside of the joint twice, and I didn't see them putting money in no safe."

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"Who's ever heard of a safe in a burger joint?" demanded Roger. "They're supposed to be in banks and courthouses."

"Right," said Ernie. "And at least we got out. Ain't no way they can spot us among all these cars now."

"Yeah," grunted Tony, "a successful getaway with our hundred bucks."

"Hey," said Roger. "What's with that guy?"

A car in the opposite lane was blinking its headlights on and off, on and off, on and off. Ernie shrugged, and continued driving north.

Moments later another car in the opposite lane did the same thing. On and off, on and off, on and off. Then another. And another.

"What're these turkeys up to?" asked Roger.

"Must be part of their cruising ritual," guessed Tony.

And then it happened. A white police car came along in the opposite lane. The robbers' stomachs tightened, and a chill went down Ernie's back. But he knew it would be okay. In Portland they were just one car among many; no reason for the copper to take special notice of them.

The police car's headlights went off, and then on, and then off again, and then on again.

Ernie looked over at Tony, who shrugged, while in the back seat Roger said, "What the heck!"

The police car went past in the opposite lane, the officer inside clearly looking over at them. In his rear view mirror Ernie watched in horror as the police car U-turned and came up fast behind them. It honked.

"What'll we do?" cried Roger.

"We should pull over and act dumb," said Tony.

"No," said Ernie, resolution steeling him for the chase. "I don't know how, but the pig has made us. It's escape or a stretch in prison."

Ernie floored the accelerator.

In his rear view mirror he saw the cruiser's overhead blues and reds come to life and flash brightly in the summer air. Then came the siren, and then the sweat beneath his shirt.

It was all over within minutes. Soon there were more police cars around the Rabbit than Ernie had seen in his whole life. They bottled him up, and the boys surrendered.

Roger broke down, wailed that it was only a hundred dollars and that they would pay for the door and cash register. Ernie quickly handed over the hundred.

They read them their rights. Ernie had heard it all before, on *Adam-12* and a hundred

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other cop shows. It helped him regain his composure, knowing that he was sharing an experience already had by syndicate dons and famous jewel thieves.

After the police had finished reading the Miranda to him, the copper who originally took out after him said, "You must be from a small town or the country."

"So?" demanded Ernie. "What of it?"

"City lights are bright, boy. Not just around the light but, with so many, all through the city. And in Portland, with the clouds reflecting them, it's almost as bright some nights as it is during the day."

"What's that got to do with anything?" Ernie said.

"People sometimes forget to turn their lights on. Yours were off. In Portland, people signal other drivers whose lights are off by flashing their own lights off and on. That's why I figured you weren't from around here. That's the reason I was trying to stop you: to tell you to turn your lights on."

Reform school until twenty-one was the sentence on Ernie Mohan. To all his fellow inmates he had one lesson to tell: "Never steal where you live," he said. For Ernie still believed he was the toughest and smartest crook around, and he wanted the cops to eliminate his competition—when they got out.

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Cast a Final Ballot

by Dick Stodghill



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Shards of glass sparkling in the glow of a street lamp were all that remained of the window on the driver's side of the LaSalle convertible. They littered the pavement and covered the lap of the portly man behind the wheel.

Shaken by the murder of a prominent figure, I went back for a second look. Again I quickly turned away, sickened by the sight of matted blood on dark hair visible below a pearl gray borsolino. A stream of red traced a ragged pattern down the victim's face and onto a suit that had come from Maderite Tailor or some other custom shop. With the election only three weeks away, Akron's independent candidate for mayor had dropped out of the race. Someone had cast a final ballot for Owen C. Spencer.

I turned up the collar of my suitcoat against the chill October air. Unlike Spencer's, the suit was off the rack at Federman's, a cut-rate department store on Main Street. It had cost twenty-two dollars and was only a year old, but already the coat was starting to fray around the cuffs and the seat was shiny on both pairs of pants. In the Depression year of 1937 that was of no great import to most people. Still, I would have to think about replacing it in the spring.

There was no reason to linger. In someone's opinion the story was too big for a police beat reporter, so within minutes a team of *Times-Press* political writers had elbowed me out of the picture. If an arrest hadn't been made before the voters went to the polls, they would hand it back and go on to bigger things. Writers of their ilk worked behind desks, whiling away the hours on think pieces; I spent my days and nights in a shadowy world inhabited by armed robbers, con artists, petty thieves, and steely-eyed predators.

After having been pushed aside like a lowly cub, I wasn't ready for a routine evening of listening to radio in the parlor at the boardinghouse on Dudley Street. Sitting alone with a book in my upstairs room was no more appealing. At the Lenox Cafe I ordered a Burkhardt's and drank it straight from the bottle while standing behind bar stools occupied by rubberworkers from Goodyear Plant One across the street. It wasn't shift-change time, but the place was packed. Bits and pieces of conversation revealed they had come from a meeting at the union hall on Case Avenue.

With half an ear I listened to the animated discussion cen-

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tering on seniority issues. Would the topic suddenly change if I were to leap atop the bar and announce the murder? Temporarily, perhaps, but not for long. My thoughts drifted to Sue Baney. I searched my pockets for a nickel to phone her but came up empty. I went back to listening and wondering.

A hearty slap on the back jarred me from my reverie. As I turned to protest, Jack Eddy said, "Figured you might stop by here, buddy. What was all the excitement about?"

A phone call from the newspaper had sent me dashing out of Bauer's boardinghouse in the middle of supper. All I'd had time to say was, "Sorry, Mrs. Bauer, but it sounds like a big story." And it was, but not mine.

I waited until Jack had a beer in his hand and there was a fresh one in my own before saying, "Somebody with a gun added a hole to Owny Spencer's head."

"Whose head?"

"Owen C. Spencer. For God's sake, Jack, don't you read the newspapers?"

"Oh, yeah, Spencer. Some kind of politician, isn't he?"

"Not any more. A couple of hours ago he was the independent candidate for mayor."

"Is that what it's all about, buddy? Politics?"

"Beats me, Jack. I can't see its having anything to do with the mayoralty race. They play rough in Akron, sure, and Spencer was running stronger than anyone anticipated, but it's hard to imagine the Republicans or Democrats ordering his execution. I can't even figure which party is likely to benefit, and I doubt if anyone else can."

Jack, the man with the ready answers, cocked an eyebrow. "Even so, it's going to put some pressure on them. The solid citizens will be doing a lot of speculating."

I nodded, knowing there would be a certain amount of finger pointing. Less of it, though, than the politicians would believe. The truth was the majority of Akronites didn't much care about their game. Still, Jack was right up to a point, so I said, "Yeah, they'll be burning the midnight oil at City Hall and wherever the Democrats are congregating these days. But I'm out of it. The hotshots on the political desk took over—and they're welcome to it."

Jack Eddy chuckled while poking my arm just below the shoulder, the joint of his middle finger extended to make it sting. "That's no attitude, friend," he said. "Sounds like the kind of story you could use

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to make a name for yourself. Bram Geary, ace reporter."

He chuckled again. I couldn't see why the idea struck him funny.

Owny Spencer got more ink in death than he could have hoped for in life. Even if he had surprised everyone by being elected, it wouldn't have been as big a story. He pushed the latest rantings of Hitler and the Japanese bombing of Shanghai right off the front pages. I read the coverage in the morning Cleveland *Plain Dealer,* then both Akron newspapers as soon as they were on the street.

Spencer, an insurance agent and a widower for five years, had been shot when he returned to his car after visiting a woman at a West Hill apartment house. Edna Cummins was a "stunning beauty," "a statuesque blonde," or a "mystery woman," depending upon which newspaper you read. They agreed on one thing, the apartment was a west side "love nest." Edna Cummins had been taken downtown for questioning, then released when the police decided it hadn't been her finger on the trigger of a gun yet to be found. After reading the papers I would have forgotten the sordid affair had it not been for the gaunt, ragged newsboys shouting headlines from every downtown corner.

I was relaxing in the parlor at the boardinghouse, awaiting the call to supper and contemplating the most enjoyable way of spending the evening, when Jack Eddy came bursting in the front door as if a gang of toughs were in pursuit. "I'm on the case, buddy," he cried from the hallway.

"What case?"

After pitching his pale blue fedora onto a halltree hook with remarkable accuracy, he came over and plopped down on a chair facing me. "The Spencer murder, what else?"

I greeted the news with an uninterested grunt. "The cops will be thrilled. What gives a private detective agency an excuse for butting in?"

"Spencer's party hired us. They think there'll be a police coverup."

"That's nonsense, Jack."

"Of course it is. I told them so, but they weren't convinced. Said the party has to play an active role in the investigation."

I laughed. "Without Spencer they don't have a party."

"Maybe not, but they've got money. Paid for a week's work in advance."

"So what can Wellington's

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National Detective Agency do that the police won't have done before you?"

"Doublecheck. Pick up the scraps they may have overlooked. For starters, after supper we'll go out to the apartment where Spencer was killed and knock on doors."

"*We?* It's your baby, Jack. I'm thinking about calling Sue Baney, see if she wants to go for a ride."

"Some other time, buddy. Tell you what I'll do. Since you won't be working on a story, I'll pay you operative's wages for a couple of hours. You can take one floor and I'll take the next, and we'll work our way to the top."

As one of Wellington's assistant managers I assumed he had authority to hire part-time help. I said, "How much does an operative get paid?"

"Seventy-five cents an hour plus expenses. You won't have any, of course."

I mulled it over. I could use a buck and a half, and if I went out with Sue Baney I'd probably spend the better part of a dollar. That meant I'd be ahead two-fifty without even counting gas money. At nineteen cents a gallon it added up fast.

Jack did most of the talking as we drove west in his 1932 Auburn sedan. I secretly coveted the spiffy car, long and sleek with a spare tire mounted in a well in each front fender. Jack kept its brown finish sparkling.

After complaining that Mrs. Bauer's mashed potatoes had been lumpy he said, "Ever wonder how Owny Spencer made so much money in the insurance business?"

I hadn't until then. "A good salesman, I guess. He had a line of bull a mile wide."

"Nickel and dime stuff. Going around collecting ten cents a week from people, that's what most insurance men are doing these days. As long as the Depression hangs on, nobody's got the dough to buy big policies."

"Spencer was an independent agent, so that makes a difference, Jack. And don't forget he associated with people who make good money, hard times or otherwise, so he had a ready-made clientele. What are you driving at, anyway?"

"There's talk he was knocking down on claims."

"There is? I haven't heard it."

"Maybe you don't mix with the right people. Somebody who should know says that's where his real money came from."

"You mean accident cases? Arson? Stuff like that?"

Jack darted a glance my way that made me feel like a sap.

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"Too many people involved in your average accident, and if there's even a hint of arson, the out-of-town investigators come around. You don't fool those babies very often. They know all the tricks, and they aren't looking for evidence to take to court, just a reason to deny the claim."

"Well, what, then?"

"I'm not saying Owny didn't hire a torch man for an occasional job. I'm not far enough into it yet to be sure, but the gravy today is in burglaries. A pro leaves just enough tracks behind to satisfy the curious that it's legit. Faking it's not too tough, buddy."

"Do you have more to go on than rumors? You'd better take Spencer's reputation as a womanizer into account. That can get you killed."

Jack was grinning as he pulled the Auburn to the curb on Jefferson Street just ahead of the spot where Spencer had died. It was a quiet neighborhood whose residents stayed indoors after dark. "If you move in the right circles, friend," he said, "the expression on your face can get you killed. You should know that by now."

When he wanted to, Jack Eddy could beat anyone at being smug and overbearing.

Four massive white columns rising from its entryway gave the red brick apartment building an imposing appearance. There were four units on each of its four floors, two more in the front half of the basement. At the first two ground-level flats I followed Jack's advice and used the pretext of being an insurance investigator checking up on one of Spencer's personal policies. I felt like a fool, and for all I learned I could just as well have stayed home. Going back to being a newspaper reporter didn't change that, but I was comfortable in the role.

In less than an hour I was on the street again. Jack Eddy was still inside, and he had locked the Auburn. Crossing thirty miles of land hadn't tempered the frigid blast of Canadian air blowing off Lake Erie; the same street light that had illuminated Owny Spencer the night before now exposed a few scattered flakes of premature snow. Again I shivered inside the inadequate protection of the worn brown suit, hands shoved deep in my pants pockets, hat pulled low over my eyes—for all the good that did. After twice walking to the corner and back again, I went inside the outer lobby. It wasn't heated, and a locked door barred me from the warmth beyond. I considered buzzing the superintendent as Jack had

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done earlier, then discarded the idea as a bad one.

A miserable hour of pacing and beating my arms against my body went by before Jack Eddy came strolling out of the building. "For crying out loud, Jack," I said, "what were you doing in there all that time, compiling life histories?"

He glanced at his watch. "We've been here exactly two hours, friend. What's your beef?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all. I've just been standing here freezing to death for an hour, that's all."

His eyebrows shot up. "You finished that long ago? What did you find out?"

"Nothing. Nobody knows a thing, and none of them so much as offered me a cup of coffee. How about you?"

"Met an interesting woman on the second floor. We had a couple of highballs and—"

"Highballs! You were in there socializing?" A few choice words came to mind, but rather than using them I said, "So what did she say about the murder?"

"She didn't know anything about that. No one did, not even Edna Cummins, the blonde who entertained Spencer in the flat next door. She's a real piece of change, buddy, but she must have been hiding behind the door when they passed out the brains."

"So the evening was a washout, right?"

"I wouldn't say that." Jack took a dollar from his wallet and handed it to me, then added a fifty cent piece from his pocket. "You made some easy money, buddy, and I got acquainted with Alma Jackson and the Cummins dame."

My derisive snort was lost in the roar of the Auburn's powerful engine. When we were rolling, I said, "Aren't you the one who's always preaching about not mixing pleasure with business?"

He laughed. "What are rules for, sport? For breaking, that's what."

I was hoping for more of that easy Wellington money, so I made a few inquiries the next day. By the time I headed my creaky 1932 Chevrolet toward Dudley Street in East Akron, I had only one thing to show for it, a list of female names along with those of irate husbands who qualified as suspects. A few of the names appeared regularly in the society pages.

The subject of the murder came up at the supper table. Bus Bauer, head of the household and a staunch union man who spent six hours every day

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in the vulcanizing pit at Goodyear, blamed it on the Republicans. Bus blamed everything on the Republicans. Any mention of Herbert Hoover in his presence resulted in a tirade that ended only when he had worked himself up to the point of being inarticulate.

The talk excited pudgy Mabel Klosterman. She began to perspire and giggled at the wrong times. Mr. Reimer, the retired druggist, tugged nervously at the necktie he wouldn't be seen without and said he didn't know what the country was coming to. Pretty Kitty Bauer blinked her eyes at Jack Eddy while saying, "I hope you don't spend every evening working so we can't go out." Prim Miss Ferrabee coughed and said, "From what I hear, Owen C. Spencer was no better than he ought to be."

"What's that mean?" said Artie Bauer, twelve-year-old son of the household.

His older brother Paul, a high school senior I had thought would be more familiar with the earthy sayings of his industrial neighborhood than those found in discreet English novels, swallowed a mouthful of roast beef hash and said, "It means he was horsing around with broads, dummy."

Mrs. Bauer slammed a fist down on the table. "There'll be no more talk like that in this house, young man!"

"Yuh see," said her husband. "Soon as them Republicans get started, trouble breaks out all over the place."

"Oh, just shut up and eat," snapped Ivy Bauer.

I kept my eyes on my plate, knowing that if they met those of Jack Eddy I would burst out laughing and forevermore be in Mrs. Bauer's bad graces. Later I rapped on the door of Jack's room and told him what I had heard during the day. "For once it looks like Miss Ferrabee was on the beam," I said.

Jack's head had been shaking from the time I opened my mouth. "Spencer was up to his neck in phony claims," he said. "I haven't got it put together yet, but that's what got him killed. You can bank on it, buddy."

"Take another look at the names on that list I gave you."

Jack's eyes drifted up and down the sheet of copy paper, then he tossed it on the nightstand and said, "So?"

"Angela Patroni. They're saying she was Spencer's latest. She's the wife of Nick Patroni, the racketeer with ties to the Murray Hill Mob in Cleveland."

Jack smothered a yawn. "I'll keep it in mind, but this wasn't a mob rubout."

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"You know, Jack, it *could* have involved politics. I don't mean the bigshots. Hell, Mayor Schroy and Judge Patterson who's running against him aren't the kind of men to stoop to murder, but suppose some guy who thought he might lose his job if Spencer was elected went off the deep end."

"A guy with a patronage job? City employees are on civil service."

"Yeah, but—"

"Forget it, buddy. It's another of your bum ideas, so drop it."

Sue Baney's brows curled downward, but she wasn't an accomplished frowner. It was Shirley Temple, not Joan Crawford, who leaped to mind. She said, "You told me you weren't going to get involved in any more of Jack Eddy's escapades. You said you were going to steer clear of him."

"I'm not actually involved, it's more like—"

Her voice rose an octave higher than normal. *"Not actually involved?* Oh no, not at all. Now instead of tagging along for a story you've gone to work for him."

I tried to laugh, but it came out a grotesque cackle. "I wouldn't say I'm working for him. I wasn't doing anything, and it was a chance to pick up a couple of extra bucks, so—"

"I thought sure you'd call. You more or less promised you were going to. I waited and waited, and by the time I realized you weren't, it was too late to wash my hair or anything else. That's two nights in a row you didn't call."

"I'm sorry, Sue. I was going to phone you but—"

"And now you just casually tell me you were working for Jack Eddy. You know as well as I do that all he's interested in is getting ahead in the world, and he doesn't care who gets hurt along the way. I asked you to keep your distance, remember? So what do you do, you take a job with him."

"I did *not* take a job. It was just a way of picking up a little extra money so we can go someplace really nice. Next week Little Jack Little's orchestra will be at Semler's Tavern up in Cuyahoga Falls, so how about it?"

"Then you did it all for me?" She was trying to stay mad, but the familiar pixieish smile was starting to show at the ends of her mouth. "And why would a big-name band be playing at a tavern?"

"It's a huge place, Sue, not just a tavern. There's the Rainbow Room for dining and dancing and the Walbridge Club where they gamble. All kinds

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of stuff goes on there."

"Gambling? Isn't that illegal? I hope we don't end up in jail." She laid her hand on mine and said, "But I'm hungry *now*, Bram. Can't we get a hamburger or something?"

Had she asked for the moon I would have leaped in the air and tried to grab it for her.

Stagnant air was blamed for a pall of smoke that had kept the city in semidarkness all morning. It wasn't much brighter by early afternoon, and the smell of rubber from B. F. Goodrich was overpowering. Even so, the downtown sidewalks were crowded with people eager to do anything other than stay home. Many lacked the money for the necessities, but that didn't prevent them from peering in windows at the luxuries. I joined them after deadline, walking north from the *Times-Press* building at Exchange and High streets.

I found Dan Ruscinski in the usual shabby bar on Howard Street. The business district just north of the Quaker Oats plant was a blend of respectable stores and cutthroat dives. Nearly a year had passed since my old Kent School classmate had returned from the Ohio State Penitentiary in Columbus. Earlier, when the rest of the class moved up to East High as freshmen, Dan had continued his education at the Mansfield Reformatory. Now he had either given up armed robberies or had grown more proficient. Drawing a conclusion wasn't difficult because, in police parlance, he had no visible means of support yet never was short of cash. Dan was the man to talk to when you needed information on Akron's well-populated underworld.

I caught myself before saying, "So what've you been up to lately, Dan?" and instead asked about fake burglaries.

He leaned far back on his chair at a round wood table bleached white by countless dripping bottles of cheap beer. After appraising me for a moment with pale blue eyes that rarely blinked, he said, "Burglarly is for chumps. These days you're lucky to get ten cents on the dollar for the stuff you haul away. But yeah, I've heard about a couple of boys pickin' up pocket change pullin' jobs for somebody. Phony ones all set up in advance."

"Anybody who might talk off the record if that somebody in question is dead and I guarantee anonymity?"

Whenever Dan grinned with one side of his mouth I was glad we were old buddies and there

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wasn't a gun in his hand. "Maybe," he said. "If I tell 'em you're a square shooter, they might. You're not thinkin' of havin' that Wellington dick present?"

"No one but me, Dan. Scout's honor."

He grinned again and straightened up, patting down his sandy hair and brushing pretzel crumbs off his plaid shirt. "Okay, then, I'll see what I can do. Maybe I'll be givin' you a ring."

When I left the bar incongruously named the Lighthouse, I cut through Yeager's Department Store arcade to Main Street. After dodging traffic in the middle of the block, I went into the Metropolitan Building and rode the elevator to the fifth floor office of the Wellington Agency. Without giving me a chance to ask for Jack Eddy the operative pulling duty at the front desk said, "He left already. Said he had a date with some tomato he met a couple of nights ago."

Dazed by the news, I wandered back out to the street. A few doors south I turned into the Just-Rite Lunch, a hole-in-the-wall diner you entered hungry because once inside you wouldn't work up an appetite. The surroundings went unnoticed, and a tough hamburger on a soggy bun was eaten mechanically. My thoughts were on Jack and his luncheon date. Why, I wondered, hadn't he mentioned it the night we canvassed the apartment where Spencer was shot?

I was ready to head home when Jack Eddy walked into the city room at four o'clock. I could tell he didn't have any big news to pass along, so I said, "Got it solved yet?"

He ignored that and said, "I'm going out to talk to Spencer's secretary. She hasn't been at work since the shooting, and I'm sick of waiting. I figured you could ride along and fill me in on what you learned today."

"Learned today? Jack, it's not my story. You know that, but maybe you don't know the trouble I'd be in if I horned in on somebody else's. It would be the same thing as crossing another reporter's beat."

He slapped me on the back. "Break the story, friend, and see how much anyone cares about office politics."

"Ethics, Jack, not politics." But I got up and followed along after him. As we walked to his car I said, "Hear you had a date for lunch. Someone you met out at the apartment house the other night, right?"

His laugh seemed forced. "Yeah, Barney told me you stopped by the office. Sorry I

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missed you, but I was having lunch at Kaase's Tea Room with Alma Jackson. The poor kid's down in the dumps, so I was trying to cheer her up."

"You must have learned a lot over those two highballs. So why's she feeling blue, and what's it to you?"

"I told you she's a sweet kid, but life dealt her a bum hand. Six months ago her husband blew his brains out."

"No kidding? There at the apartment?"

"Of course not. At the time, they owned a house out in Bath. She never set foot in it again after that night."

The conversation ended there, but Jack's thoughts remained on suicide. As we drove across the long North Hill Viaduct he chuckled while pointing to one of many small platforms jutting out from the concrete railings. He said, "Are those things for standing and looking down, or to make it convenient for jumpers?"

It was a bum joke considering how many people had leaped to the valley of the Little Cuyahoga River far below. Two hundred feet or so, and you had the choice of landing on rooftops, streets, or the trees. "The story," I said, "is that the first one to jump after the bridge opened in 1922 was the guy who built it. They say he cut corners by using too much sand in the concrete and pocketed the money."

Jack laughed. "A comforting thought when you're right in the middle of the thing."

What could it be, I wondered, that would make a person desperate enough to climb the railing and leap? Or put a gun to his head. It was on my mind until we stopped in front of a house on Iuka Avenue, a large two story in a pleasant North Hill neighborhood. As we walked to the front door, I realized that I didn't know the secretary's name or anything else about her. Apparently her husband made good money because it wasn't a house paid for with the usual secretary's salary.

As if he had read my mind Jack Eddy said, "Her name's Margaret Vestal. She's forty-three, five seven, red hair, blue eyes, a graduate of Hammel Business College, a Methodist, never married, been with Spencer sixteen years."

"So what does she eat for breakfast? And how'd she buy this place on her pay?"

"You'll have to ask her, buddy. But the property is free and clear, I can tell you that much."

Margaret Vestal wasn't in a talking mood and had no intention of inviting us inside. That didn't deter Jack Eddy. He had

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a way of charming the ladies, so before she realized what was happening, we were all seated in an expensively furnished living room smelling of creosote from a brick fireplace that hadn't been used for a while.

Under better circumstances she would have been an attractive woman. As it was, events had left her eyes puffy from crying, she was without makeup, and it had been a few days since she had run a comb through her hair. She wore a quilted housecoat over blue silk pajamas, and under it all, I suspected, was the lush body of a full-figured woman. A large ashtray on a table beside her chair was overflowing with cigarette butts. A nearly full bottle of Seagrams VO stood beside another that was empty. Near them was a lone highball glass.

As usual, Jack Eddy wasted little time on niceties. After offering condolences and asking a few preliminary questions, he said, "How much do you know about the phony claims your boss was cashing in on?"

In the blink of an eye Margaret Vestal's face went from chalky white to livid red. "How dare you!" she cried, rising from her chair faster than I would have believed possible, arm extended as she pointed to the door. It was straight from the movies, and this time Joan Crawford did leap to mind. Myrna Loy, too, but Myrna would have done it with greater dignity and far more poise.

"How dare you," she repeated, "cast aspersions on a fine man no longer able to defend himself. Get out of my house!"

It was so melodramatic, so cornball, that I had to force back a laugh. Jack Eddy didn't even try. There was little humor in it, and none at all when he said, "Come off it, sister. We're wise to the game, so the smart thing for you to do is come clean. If you didn't take an active part, nobody's going to get on you for keeping mum. Play coy and you may take the fall by yourself."

She slumped down in her chair again. "I don't know what you're talking about. Owen would never have been involved in such a thing."

"Of course not," said Jack. "Not a fine, upstanding citizen like him. Not any more than he'd chase after dames, right?"

She stared at him disbelievingly, shaking her head. "You're really despicable. What kind of man would speak of the dead that way?"

"Kicking off doesn't make a saint out of a rat."

It seemed to me that Jack was going too far, but he sud-

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denly changed tactics. Leaning toward her, switching to a soothing tone, he said, "Look, Margaret, I know how you feel. A pal of mine was killed a couple of years back, and later a bunch of shady things he had done came out. I fought like a tiger in his defense, even kidded myself for a while that it was all a lie despite the evidence to the contrary. Then one day it dawned on me that he had been two people, the friend I knew and the shakedown artist. I didn't know that other guy, but I quit denying he had existed and went ahead mourning my friend."

She began sobbing, but soundlessly and with a handkerchief pressed to her face. Her whole body shook and heaved, making me worry that she might start choking. Grinning, Jack glanced my way and winked.

Several minutes went by before she brought herself under control, dabbed at her eyes, and began shaking her head. "I don't know anything about false claims. I refuse to believe that Owen would have been involved in anything like that."

Jack, still speaking softly, said, "But quite a few of your clients were burglarized during the past few years, isn't that so?"

"Yes, but that doesn't prove anything. Burglary is commonplace with so many men out of work."

"I'll tell you what, Margaret. You go down to the office tomorrow and check up some of the old cases. We'll talk to you again after that."

She continued dabbing at her eyes but nodded her head. "All right, but all it will do is prove you're mistaken."

When we were back in the car I said, "She was in love with the guy, Jack. Think you'll be able to believe what she says? That is, if she even bothers checking the files."

"Mainly I'm interested in seeing if what she tells me stacks up with whatever I already know or find out in the meantime."

"That old friend you were talking about, was it another operative back when you were working out of the agency's branch in Indianapolis?"

Jack began laughing. "You mean you fell for that line? Hell, I never had a friend."

I was hurrying down the steps of the front porch, off to pick up Sue Baney for a movie date, when the front door of the boardinghouse opened behind me. I glanced over my shoulder just as Kitty Bauer called, "Wait up, Bram."

Her expression fell some-

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where between angry and woeful. Even so, she was heart-wrenchingly pretty. Before I met Sue Baney, and before Jack Eddy came along and swept her off her feet, Kitty had been my secret love. Now she drew close and tilted her head back so that we were almost touching, making me realize suddenly that old feelings die hard.

She wore a lightweight print dress and hadn't taken time to slip on a jacket. With the temperature just above freezing she began to shiver. "Can we talk a minute in your car?" she said.

There was nothing to say but "sure." I opened the door for her and said, "Hop in," then walked around the old clunker. Once on the seat beside her, I started the motor even though several minutes would go by before the heater did its job. Her fragrance was tantalizing, but I worried about explaining it to Sue Baney. Maybe if I smoked a couple of cigarettes . . .

I had shifted on the seat and was facing her, but Kitty kept her eyes fixed on a point somewhere directly ahead. She cleared her throat, finding it difficult to express her thoughts. She did it a second time, then suddenly turned to me and said, "Did you know Jack has a date tonight?"

He had told me on the way back from North Hill that he was taking Alma Jackson out to dinner. Now I cleared *my* throat. "Well, I wouldn't exactly call it a date."

Kitty stamped her foot against the floorboard. "You wouldn't call it a date? Just what *would* you call it when a man takes a woman to dinner and who knows what else?"

"Well, uh, it's sort of business. I mean, she lives at the apartment where Owen Spencer was killed and—"

"Is he planning to take everyone in the building out to dinner, or just this woman?" Her words were syrupy sweet, an act, and it wasn't a question she expected me to answer. Then, more harshly again, "What's her name?"

"Jackson. Alma Jackson."

"What's she like? Is she pretty?"

"I've never laid eyes on the woman, Kitty."

"What do you know about her?"

"Nothing. Well, she can belt down a highball pretty quick and her husband killed himself about six months ago. That's all, honest."

"Husband? You mean she's a *widow?*" From the shocked look on her face and the way she said "widow," it was obvious Kitty felt that once a woman

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had experienced the joy of matrimony no man would ever again be safe in her company.

"How did you know Jack had a date tonight?" I asked.

"For heaven's sake, Bram, he called Mother early this afternoon and told her he wouldn't be here for supper. Then he came in, got all spiffed up, and rushed right out again."

"Yeah, but how did you know he was meeting a woman?"

She gave a mirthless laugh. "Do you think a woman can't tell when a man is on his way to a date with another?"

Until then I had. I was still working it out in my mind when Kitty said, "I want you to find out everything about her for me."

"Kitty, I don't—"

She stamped her foot again. "Bram Geary, don't you sit there and try to tell me you can't do it. A newspaperman can find out anything he wants to." A touch of color rose to her cheeks. "And I want you to find out exactly what they do after dinner tonight, then tell me the whole truth about it."

Before I could reply, or try to think of a reply, she opened the door and ran back up the porch steps and on inside. I sat there a moment wondering if any other twenty-three-year-old man led a life as complicated as mine, and what it would be like on a ship with an all male crew that made port only twice a year.

It was close to midnight when I heard Jack Eddy tiptoeing up the stairs. After his door closed, I crossed the hall and lightly rapped on it. "What's up, buddy?" he said when I was inside. "How come you're not in bed? Don't you work tomorrow?"

"Yes, I work tomorrow. I've been wondering what you found out."

"What do you mean, found out?"

"About the case, for Pete's sake. Did she tell you anything worthwhile this time?"

He stared at me as if I were insane. "The subject never came up."

"Where have you been all this time? What were you doing?"

"What the hell is this, an inquisition? Did somebody appoint you housemother or what?"

"I'm just interested, that's all. Were you at her apartment?"

"We had a couple of drinks when I took her home, sure."

"Is that all?"

He stepped around me and opened the door, then gave me a shove out into the hallway. "Honest to God, boy, I think

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you need a vacation or something. You're acting freaky lately."

Dress shirts were three for four dollars at O'Neil's, but I had enough for only one so it cost me a buck fifty. At Federman's one almost as good was only ninety-nine cents, which was why I normally avoided the high tone department stores. After wrapping the shirt in tissue paper and putting it in a box, the clerk took the money and thanked me. I said, "You're Alma Jackson, aren't you?"

She raised her eyebrows. "How did you know?"

"I'm a friend of Jack Eddy's. Maybe he's mentioned me, Bram Geary."

She said, "Oh, it's nice to meet you," in a vague sort of way that made it obvious he hadn't. It was obvious, too, that she was puzzled over my motive for being there and, as she couldn't arrive at an explanation, was wary of me.

I would have to tell Kitty that Alma Jackson was attractive, at the same time making sure to play up the lines beginning to show at the ends of her mouth and eyes. Also the circles under her eyes that face powder couldn't conceal. Describing her bearing would be more difficult. World-weary beyond her years was the best I could do.

The phone on my desk was ringing when I walked into the city room. I trotted the last few yards, lifted the receiver, and heard Dan Ruscinski say, "That you, Bram? Can you come down here?"

"I'm on my way," I replied, knowing that "here" meant the Lighthouse. I reversed direction but had taken only a few steps when city editor Ben Goldsmith called, "Geary!"

I went to where he was bent over his desk using a blue china marker on someone's copy. Without raising his head he said, "All finished with your shopping, are you? Through talking on the phone? Thinking about going out on your beat for a while?"

"I needed a shirt, Ben, and just ducked into O'Neil's for a second."

He straightened up, then leaned far back in his chair. "Are you going to have something for the afternoon editions?"

"Sure, Ben, I—"

"That's nice. I was beginning to wonder if the police department had shut down for vacation. Or if you might have gotten the idea you were on one yourself the past few days."

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"It's been kind of slow, Ben."

"Really? Then I've been wrong in thinking your mind has been on other matters?"

"Look," I said, a little irritated, "they took the big story away from me, remember?" It wasn't the way a reporter talked to Goldsmith, so I made a hasty switch in tone. "But I've got a good one coming up, Ben. The Akron cops are raiding a marijuana operation down at Canton today."

"Yes, I believe you mentioned that before. I assume your story will answer the big question on my mind."

"What's that, Ben?"

"Just how it comes about that the Akron police are making a drug raid in another city in another county."

"I think—"

"I'm not interested in what you think, Geary. I *am* interested in having more copy from the police beat than I've been getting lately. Copy containing facts, not surmises or the thoughts of anyone on the *Times-Press* payroll."

"Right, Ben." I waited until I was certain he was finished with me, then hurried off to Central Police Station. The Lighthouse would have to wait.

The delay proved short. The raiding party hadn't returned from Canton, so I settled for the story of two female patients strolling out of City Hospital in skimpy gowns and creating a furor on East Market Street. Little else was going on—or coming off.

Dan Ruscinski gave me the fish eye when I sat down at his table. "No dice on that meeting, pal," he said. "The people I talked to said you've only got half your facts straight."

My mind was still on Goldsmith, so I wasn't disappointed. "No big loss, but thanks for trying," I said, getting up from my chair again, wondering why he hadn't just told me over the phone. I paid for a bottle of Erin Brew at the bar and took it over to him. "Dan, I've been hearing rumors that Owny Spencer was fooling around with Nick Patroni's wife. Anything to it as far as you know?"

He gave me a cold stare. "I don't monkey around with questions concernin' Nick Patroni's wife. If you got any sense, slick, you won't either."

Somewhat chastened, I returned to the police station just as the raiders were getting out of their cars. I buttonholed Plato Largis, the detective in charge, and he gave me the story, such as it was. Try as I might, I couldn't get excited about a bunch of weeds plucked from farms outside Canton. To satisfy Goldsmith, I verified that the raid was a joint effort

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involving all departments where the crop was being sold.

The story didn't make page one, but the gals parading around outside City Hospital got three paragraphs there. The Owny Spencer story was nearby, even though there was nothing new to report. Efforts now were centering on trying to find the murder weapon. The big story of the day was the signing of a nonaggression pact between Germany and Belgium. It wasn't meant to be funny, but it struck me that way. Surely the Germans would be sleeping better now that they knew the aggressive Belgians wouldn't be invading the fatherland.

Later when I met Jack Eddy for lunch at Ptomaine Tommie's I told him about talking with Dan Ruscinski. He didn't seem interested. Then I said I had accidentally bumped into Alma Jackson while buying a shirt at O'Neil's.

He turned on his stool, giving me a skeptical look for a moment, then breaking out in a grin. "Just accidentally bumped into her, huh? How did you know who she was?"

"Well, you told me she worked in that department."

"So you introduced yourself. You know, friend, you really are acting weird lately. What's with you anyway?"

"Nothing. I needed a shirt and it was just a coincidence, that's all. What made her husband kill himself?"

"Why don't you go back and buy another shirt and ask her?"

Late in the afternoon I walked north on Main Street in pale but pleasantly warm autumn sunlight. Jack Eddy was going to the Spencer Agency to see Margaret Vestal and had invited me along. When the cute, freckle-faced elevator operator at the Metropolitan Building saw me coming, she said, "Fifth floor," to no one in particular. I showed up so regularly she might have had me pegged as a Wellington op.

Margaret Vestal was ready for us. When we were in her private office, she pointed to a stack of file folders at one corner of her desk and said, "There they are. All the burglary claims we've had in the past eighteen months and there isn't a thing suspicious about any of them. See for yourself, if you want to go to the trouble."

She looked like a different woman from the one we had met at the house on Iuka Avenue. Very professional and composed, immaculately groomed, fashionably coiffed as if she had come straight from the beauty parlor. Perhaps she

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had. A framed photo of Owen Spencer was on her desk, and I wondered if it had been there while he was alive.

Jack took the folders onto his lap and began idly thumbing his way through them, merely reading the names on the tabs, hesitating briefly at one and then going on. After replacing them on the desk he said, "What did you go on?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You said there's nothing suspicious. What are you basing that on?"

Her composure slipped a little while she searched for an answer. Not for long; she exuded confidence again as she said, "I've been in this business for sixteen years. Don't you think I'd know if something wasn't kosher?"

This was the time when Jack Eddy would bore in for the kill. I was on the edge of my chair ready for him to start ripping her story to pieces. Instead he amazed me by seeming to accept her vague statements without question. "So everything checks up okay?" was all he said. She merely smiled, so he added, "Well, I guess that settles it."

"I told you you were wrong," Margaret Vestal said smugly. "If anything out of the ordinary was happening, I would have known about it."

"Yeah, I guess you would." Jack got up, so I did the same. He handed her one of his business cards and said, "Thanks for your trouble. If anything turns up to change your mind, give me a call."

Margaret Vestal's head was shaking. "Nothing will."

When we were back on the street I said, "Boy, that was a big nothing. I figured on you putting her through the mill, and you hardly opened your mouth. What happened to change your mind about the burglaries' not being on the up and up?"

"Nothing happened." After a pause he gave me a weak grin. "What would have been the point in arguing with her?"

His words didn't ring true. Something was troubling him, but when I tried to find out what it was, he abruptly cut me off. I didn't expect him to admit he had been wrong—that would have been too far a departure from the norm—but I hadn't thought he would surrender so meekly. At any other time he would have hung onto an idea like a stray dog hangs onto a bone.

I was growing restless but managed to sit still until Lowell Thomas ended his newscast with the familiar, "So long until tomorrow."

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Then, after struggling up from the depths of the soft couch I had been sharing with Mr. Reimer, I went to the telephone in the hallway, leaving him and the others to spend fifteen minutes with *Amos 'n' Andy*. Only Jack Eddy and Mrs. Bauer, still busy in the kitchen cleaning up from supper, were missing from the scene of domesticity.

If Sue Baney agreed, we would take a ride around town, maybe stop somewhere for a chocolate soda or a Coke. As I was reaching for the phone it startled me by ringing. "That you, buddy?" said Jack Eddy. His voice was subdued, nothing at all like his usual forceful, staccato delivery. In the two days since we had visited Margaret Vestal's office he had been lethargic, withdrawn. It was so out of character for him that I wondered if he was just off his feed or if something truly serious might be wrong.

I told him yes, it was me, and in the same dead tone he said, "Better come down to the agency."

"What's up?"

"I'll explain when you get here." He hung up before I could question him further or tell him Mrs. Bauer was furious because he had missed supper without letting her know. And so much for taking a little spin around town with Sue Baney.

The evening movie crowd had beaten me to the Main Street parking places, but Jack's Auburn was in a choice spot just north of the Howe Hotel next door to his office. I drove several blocks east again before finding a space near the post office. As I walked down the East Market slope to Main, a panhandler slipped from the shadows, hand outstretched. When he said, "Brother, can you spare a dime?," I handed him one, then had to hurry on with a shake of my head when accosted by two more shabby men with the sickness of the times showing in their eyes. Doing that always bothered me even when I didn't have a dime to spare.

The Wellington op pulling night desk duty motioned with his head toward the hallway leading to Jack's office. Jack didn't hear me approaching, so I stood a moment at the doorway. He was staring off in space, necktie loosened, feet up on the desk, hair unruly. Smoke trailed upward from a cigarette in a glass ashtray rimmed by a tiny Goodyear tire.

When I coughed, Jack Eddy jerked back to reality from wherever he had been. "Hi-yuh, buddy," he said, giving me

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a washed-out smile as he dropped his feet from the desktop and stood up. He took his suitcoat from a hook on the wall, placed his fedora far back on his head, and adjusted his tie. Without the enthusiasm that seemed called for he said, "They've got the gun."

I whistled through my teeth. "Where'd they find it?"

"In the weeds beside the river under the Bath Road bridge. A couple of kids out for a hike in the valley spotted it and phoned the sheriff. Looks like it was tossed from a car and was supposed to go in the river, but missed."

"Why'd you call me, Jack? It still isn't my story."

"It is now, buddy."

"I don't follow you, Jack."

"When the county boys ran a check on the gun's serial number, it turned out to be an old friend. Sheriff O'Neil handed it over to the Akron cops so they can run a ballistics test. After that it'll just be a matter of putting two and two together, buddy, and the case'll be all wrapped up."

"It's still not clear to me, Jack."

He shot an irritated look my way. "It's simple enough if you'll just think a minute. The county had seen the gun before and had the serial number but hadn't test fired it because there was no reason to at the time. All the city had was the bullet that killed Spencer. When the check is completed, it'll match up with the gun and they'll also know who it belonged to."

"How do you know all this before they even finish the ballistics test? How could you possibly know ahead of time what the result will be?"

He turned on me, suddenly angry. "Lay off with the quiz show, will you? Come on, let's get out of here."

Jack was blowing off steam, I understood that. I just happened to be handy when he needed to vent his anger and frustration. I followed quietly out to the Auburn.

He was silent during the drive west. I was itching to ask questions, but the set of his jaw warned me off. I kicked the situation around in my mind and had figured it out for myself before we turned onto Jefferson Street. Accepting the truth was another matter. When we pulled to the curb I said, "Look, Jack, maybe I'd better wait out here for you."

"I want you inside with me." He didn't explain why.

Alma Jackson rang us into the building. When she opened the door of her flat and found me there beside Jack, her expression went from pleased to

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puzzled to apprehensive. She stepped aside so we could enter, then asked if either of us wanted a drink. Her own half empty glass was on a chairside table near the windows overlooking the street.

Jack told her we weren't thirsty. We took seats at opposite ends of a couch facing her. She was aware of the tension that made me wish I had accepted a drink before Jack declined for both of us. It was Alma who finally broke the oppressive silence by saying, "Is something wrong?" She had been looking at Jack from the beginning, knowing I was a mere spectator.

Jack's tone was surprisingly gentle. "They found the gun, Alma. We know the story, or most of it."

"What do—"

"Let's not play games with each other, okay? Look, kid, I don't blame you. Spencer was a rat, and he got just what he deserved. Too bad somebody didn't do the job a long time ago. It didn't play out that way, so level with me. What happened that night?"

Alma Jackson finished her drink at one swallow, then glanced toward the bottle of Kentucky Tavern on a sideboard. When her eyes met Jack's again, she seemed to deflate like a blimp when someone released its helium in the hangar at Wingfoot Lake. After a long few seconds she softly said, "I didn't feel like coming home and fixing dinner after work, so I stopped at Fred Gareri's for spaghetti. After that I picked up a few groceries at Acme, then was just coming in as that man was leaving. He knew who I was because Bill and I had our insurance through his agency." She stood up abruptly. "Look, I need a drink."

Jack was on his feet, too, reaching for her glass. "I'll get it." I was wishing he hadn't; when Alma sat down again, it left the two of us facing each other with nothing to say. To avoid looking at her, I gazed vacantly around the room, which was in need of tidying up. All the time I could feel her eyes on me. When Jack returned, though, he was carrying two highballs and handed one to each of us.

After a hefty pull on hers, Alma said, "I couldn't believe it when he made a play for me. He knew what happened with Bill and had to know the reason for it, but that didn't stop him. God, what an ego that man had. He thought he could charm anyone in a skirt. He said, 'I've been warm for you, baby, since the first time I laid eyes on you.' I didn't miss his innuendo, but

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coming from him it made me want to throw up."

She paused to take another drink, a long one that nearly emptied her glass. The effect of the bourbon was beginning to show. She used the back of her hand to wipe her chin, then continued. "It really started when Bill lost his job. He was desperate for money, tried everything he could think of so we wouldn't lose the house, too. The breaks just wouldn't come his way. Finally he went to the Spencer Agency to inquire about the cash value of a policy on his life. I didn't know about it at the time, but that's when the arrangements were made for the burglary. Bill wasn't that kind of man no matter how bad the situation might have been. He had to be sold on the idea, I'm certain of that."

She paused again, this time to tap a cigarette from a fresh pack of Old Golds. Jack got up, lit it for her, and told her to go on. She inhaled deeply, then coughed. "After the burglary Bill kept getting more and more depressed. He even quit looking for work, just sat around the house all day. Finally I insisted that he tell me what was bothering him, and that's when I learned the truth. He didn't go into detail, just said he was offered the opportunity when he went to the Spencer Agency. Until then I had never suspected the burglary wasn't on the up and up."

Jack said, "The police must have bought it, too."

"I guess so. They were from the sheriff's office, you know. If it had been detectives from Akron, they might not have. When I think back on it, though, the man in charge seemed skeptical. He asked some unusual questions and kept going over and over the same ground as though he didn't believe what we were telling him."

"City detectives are usually sharper," said Jack. "You must have caught a deputy who was on the ball. How long after your husband told you the story was it before . . ."

Even Jack Eddy was lost for the words to use in asking a woman about her husband's suicide.

"The next day. I came home late in the afternoon and found—"

Jack raised his hand to cut her off. "No need to go into detail. Just finish telling me what happened that night."

"As I said, he came on strong. When I pushed on by him without a word, he laughed and said he might drop by some evening to see if I felt like being more chummy. I was unlocking the door by then, and something

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just snapped. I guess I went haywire because I dropped the sack of groceries on the floor and went to the desk and got the gun. The sheriff had given it back to me, but I didn't want it. I just dropped it in there to get it out of the way. I'm not sure how I even knew how to put the clip in it, but I did. Then I ran out after him. He had just gotten in his car and when he saw me he started to smile. He thought I had changed my mind, I guess, until he saw the gun."

Alma had been staring at the floor since Jack had lit her cigarette. She suddenly raised her head, finished what little was left of her drink, and then gave Jack a half-hearted smile. "So what happens now?"

"We go downtown and tell the story."

"Look, Jack," I said, "what's the point? You said yourself that Spencer got what he deserved."

"That's not the way it works, buddy. Anyway, how long do you think it's going to take the police to put it together now that they've got the gun and know who it belonged to? It wouldn't surprise me if they already have."

He stood up and held out his hand to Alma Jackson. "Come on, kid, let's get it over with."

*

Sue Baney shuddered when I finished telling the story. "It must have been a horrible experience for you. I think the woman should get a medal for what she did. What's going to happen to her?"

"Who knows? The charge'll have to be first degree or they'd hear the uproar a hundred miles away. What'll happen, though, I'll bet, is that a jury will convict her of a lesser charge and she'll be out in ten years or so."

Another shiver passed through Sue's body. "Ten years in prison, my God. I couldn't stand it, Bram. Even one day would be too much."

I signaled the waiter for more coffee. After he filled our cups I said, "It's Jack I feel sorry for."

Sue choked on her coffee. "Jack Eddy? You feel sorry for Jack Eddy? Why, in heaven's name?"

"I think he was really nuts about her. Still is, I suppose. Taking her down to the police station was mighty rough on him."

"He'll live. Anyway, I thought Kitty Bauer was his girlfriend."

"So did Kitty." I couldn't help but laugh. "Jeez, has she ever been in a snit lately. It almost seems like she blames me."

"You? Why?"

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"Well, I guess she knew how I felt about . . ." I stopped short. Not in time, however. Sue was frowning at me. It seemed she had been doing a lot of it lately.

"Felt about what?" she said. "About *her?* This is something new."

"Now look, Sue." Boy, I had really put my foot in it. "It was before I met you and we never did anything. What I mean is—"

"Yes, what *do* you mean? What did you think I thought you might have done?"

"Nothing. I didn't think you thought we'd done anything. I just sort of liked her, that's all, but she didn't know it. I mean I never told her, but she must have guessed."

Sue laughed, but there wasn't a hint of humor in it. "Guessed? With you hanging around the house cow-eyed all the time, it sure took some guessing."

This had to end. "Look, Sue, you're the only one I've ever loved and—"

"Loved? You've never told me you loved me."

My cheeks had to have been the color of strawberries. "Well, I just figured you knew."

"Do you mean guessed? Isn't that what girls do?"

I worked up the courage to look at her. She was smiling her pixieish smile. When she reached across the table, put her hand on mine, and wrinkled her nose, I melted.

After looking over page one of the first edition, Ben Goldsmith cleared his throat to attract my attention. "Good story, Geary," he said as if the words hurt while coming out. Then he leaned back, grinning. "After this maybe those fireballs across the room will stick to writing political stuff and editorials nobody reads."

The ringing of the telephone on my desk saved me from having to think up a reply. Jack Eddy, sounding more like his usual self, said, "Ready for a follow-up, friend? I'll pick you up out front in ten minutes."

"Jack, I have to . . ." I was talking to a dial tone.

When the Auburn pulled to the curb, I opened the passenger door but didn't get in. "What's this all about, Jack? I've got a job, you know, and—"

"No kidding, you've got a job? Then why don't you try using your head for something besides a hat rack? Just get in the car, dammit."

"Where are we going?" I asked as he made a sweeping U-turn in front of traffic on Exchange Street.

"To wrap this job up, where else?"

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"I thought it *was* wrapped up."

Jack turned to me, frowning, then broke into a grin. He gave me a hard poke on the arm. "That's what I like about having you around, buddy. You make me feel like Einstein. Laugh-a-Minute Geary, that's what they should call you."

Margaret Vestal had one arm in a sleeve of her coat, ready to go to lunch, when we walked into her private office at the Spencer Agency. She gave Jack a wide smile and said, "I hear you solved the case. Congratulations."

"Save it, sister," he said. "That left the job half finished. Bram here saw right through your cosy little setup."

That came as bigger news to me than it did to Margaret Vestal. The coat slipped off her arm and fell to the floor. I started forward to pick it up but was stopped by Jack's outstretched arm. Margaret laid a hand on her desk to steady herself, then eased around it and slumped down on the chair. Rather than the angry response I was expecting, all she said was, "How?"

"The first thing he said the day we went to your house was, 'How can she afford a place like this on a secretary's salary?" The answer was, you couldn't. But you were the brains behind Owny Spencer. You did the paperwork, you kept the books, you handled the money. It wasn't hard for you to figure a way to rake in big bucks without Spencer's catching on. You loved the guy, but that didn't stop you from playing him for a sucker."

Her spunk was returning. "Nothing you've said means a thing. I happen to have made some good investments and—"

"Can it, lady. I've wasted too much time on you already." Jack took several sheets of folded paper from the inside pocket of his suitcoat and tapped them against his hand. "It's all here in black and white. Dates, places, payoffs, the works. And one more thing, the statement of your contact man. Pick up your coat, sis, we've got a date with the sheriff."

Instead she opened a desk drawer and picked up a gun.

I swore under my breath. If I got out alive, how was I going to explain to Sue Baney that twice within a month I had let Jack Eddy lead me into a situation in which people were pointing guns?

Jack casually pocketed the sheets of paper. "Which one of us you gonna shoot, Maggie?" he said. "That's a single-shot piece you've got there. You'll have to fire, pull the hammer

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back, then fire again. Before you get off that second shot the one of us still standing will have the gun away from you. Is it worth it, parlaying a few years behind bars into a date with the hot seat?"

His point wasn't lost on her. While she was pondering it, Jack reached across the desk and said, "Gimme that thing." As he took the gun from her hand he added, "I didn't figure you for a dumb move like this. Where were you going to run to? But I'll tell you what, make a clean breast of it to the sheriff and we won't mention the gun. Now pick up that coat like I told you."

She came around the desk in a trancelike shuffle. As she bent to get the coat from the floor, Jack lifted his right foot to boot her in the backside. "That's for some of the good people who got hurt," he said, but his foot remained frozen in the air. He couldn't do it. Hard-bitten Jack Eddy couldn't kick a woman, no matter what she might have done. With his foot raised high he looked for all the world like one of the stick figure characters in the *Dick Tracy* strip, so I snickered. As Margaret Vestal straightened up and turned, a look of bewilderment on her face, he aimed the kick at me.

*

I made the final edition with my second big story of the day. Margaret Vestal had confessed all even before she was offered a seat at the sheriff's office.

Tomorrow, I decided, or maybe the day after, I would hit Ben Goldsmith up for a five dollar raise. If I wasn't worth thirty-five bucks a week to the *Times-Press* I'd take my services elsewhere. That's what I'd tell him. Without actually committing myself, of course.

When Jack Eddy arrived at the boardinghouse on Dudley Street shortly before supper, I was waiting on the front porch. As he approached the steps, I said, "Jack, you never told me where you came up with the dope on Margaret Vestal."

He had a blank look on his face. "Come again?"

"Those sheets of paper you showed her," I said impatiently.

He slapped me on the back, then draped an arm over my shoulder. "Hell, buddy, that was my report on the Alma Jackson case."

I was dumbfounded, but probably shouldn't have been. "What about her contact man? You didn't have a statement from him, either?"

"Never even heard his name until she spilled it to the sheriff."

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"In other words, it was all a bluff. Just a wild guess on your part. Another thing, you didn't have a client once the murder was solved, did you? What happened today was all for your ego. You spouted off about phony claims, then had to prove you weren't way off base."

He grinned and gave me a playful punch in the midsection that took my breath away. "Well, was I off base?"

"My God, Jack, you could have been sued. Both of us could have, leveling charges we couldn't back up."

"No witnesses, sport. And it wasn't a wild guess, it was simple deduction. For one thing, from what I found out about Owny Spencer he didn't have either the brains or the guts for it. Your pal Ruscinski did everything but come right out and tell you it wasn't him, remember?"

"All he said was I only had half my facts straight."

"Wasn't that enough to put you wise?"

Before I could reply, Mrs. Bauer opened the door and said, "What are you two doing out here? Didn't you hear me call you for supper?"

Pork and sauerkraut were on the menu, but murder was the topic of conversation at the table. When I thought everything that could be said had been said, Artie Bauer looked toward his father with a smirk. "You was wrong, Pop. It wasn't any uh them Republicans that shot that guy."

Bus Bauer glared at him. "Know the woman's politics, do yuh?"

"No, but—"

"Then put a zipper on that mouth uh yours till yuh know what you're talkin' about, boy."

I stifled a laugh, but Artie's big brother Paul put his head back and guffawed. Mabel Klosterman giggled, and Miss Ferrabee went, "tsk, tsk."

While we were waiting for Mrs. Bauer to bring the cherry pie from the kitchen, Jack Eddy looked across the table to Kitty and said, "How about taking in a movie, kiddo?"

She gave him a haughty stare. "I'm not sure I—"

"Run upstairs and powder your nose while we're waiting so we can make tracks right after dessert."

Kitty opened her mouth, closed it again, slid her chair back, and headed for the stairway.

Later I sat alone on the porch steps and smoked a cigarette. From somewhere in the distance came the melancholy strains of "That Old Feeling," number one song on that week's Hit Parade. I knew it

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well—Shep Fields and His Rippling Rhythm, Bob Goday on the vocal. It was cooling off again, and the smell of rubber was pungent in the night air. There was a heaviness in the pit of my stomach, but not from the smell and not from Mrs. Bauer's sauerkraut. The music fit my mood, though. I couldn't get Alma Jackson off my mind. While Jack was enjoying a movie, she was sitting alone in a jail cell for killing an unsavory character, a chaser. But something else had provided her motive, so I wondered what she was thinking after finding out she had killed the wrong person. And if she realized that the mitigating circumstances which should have led to a conviction on a reduced charge were no longer valid.

Sue Baney and I celebrated my raise listening to Little Jack Little and His Orchestra at Semler's Tavern. It was a good band and Jack Little sang all the hit tunes of the day. I grew weary, though, of hearing him say, "Here 'tis," after introducing every number. A trademark might be okay, but enough was enough.

The food was okay, too, and Sue loved the Rainbow Room. Her eyes sparkled while we danced, and she blushed fiery red when I slipped Little Jack Little a buck and all eyes were on us as the band played "Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?"

During a break I said, "You should have been there when I talked to old Goldsmith today. He never batted an eye when I demanded a five dollar raise."

Sue's smile faded. "You specified five dollars? Why, Bram? Why didn't you ask for ten?"

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Oracle of the Dog

by G. K. Chesterton

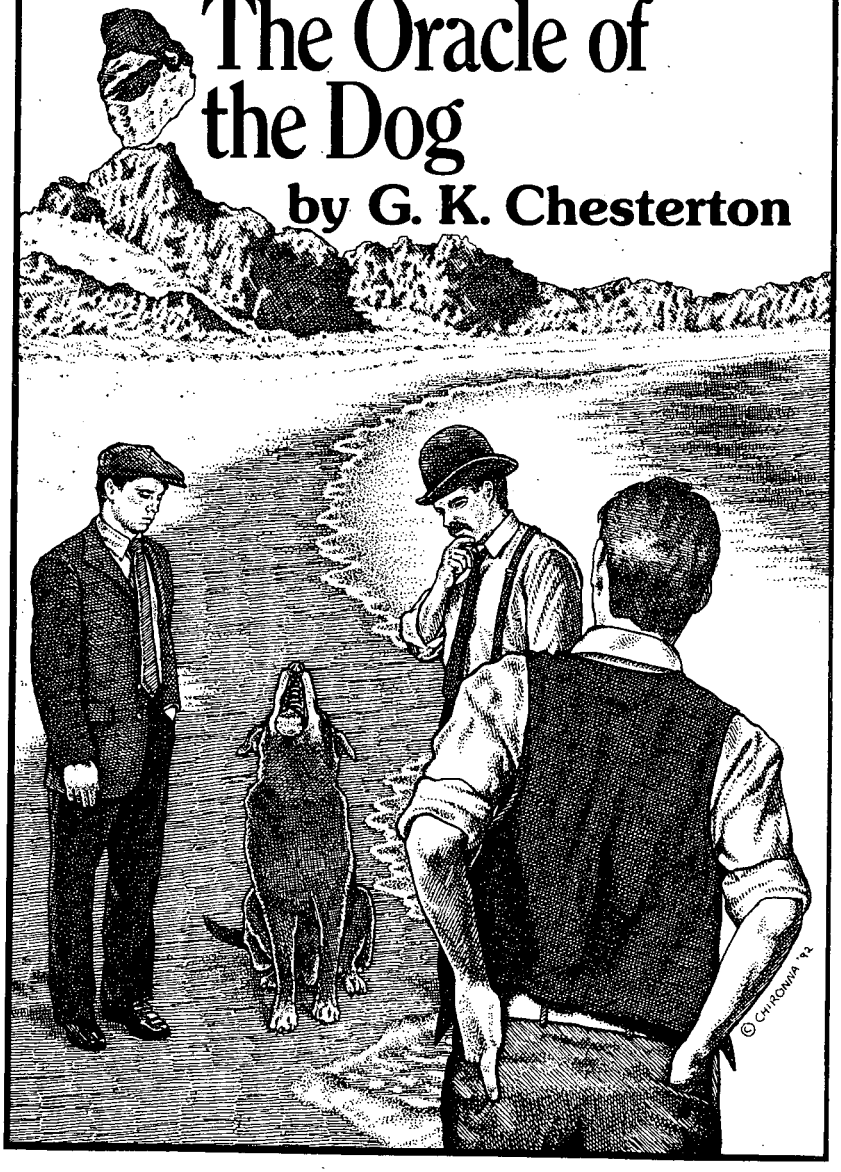


Illustration by Ron Chironna

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"Yes," said Father Brown, "I always like a dog, so long as he isn't spelt backwards."

Those who are quick in talking are not always quick in listening. Sometimes even their brilliancy produces a sort of stupidity. Father Brown's friend and companion was a young man with a stream of ideas and stories, an enthusiastic young man named Fiennes, with eager blue eyes and blond hair that seemed to be brushed back, not merely with a hairbrush but with the wind of the world as he rushed through it. But he stopped in the torrent of his talk in a momentary bewilderment before he saw the priest's very simple meaning.

"You mean that people make too much of them?" he said. "Well, I don't know. They're marvelous creatures. Sometimes I think they know a lot more than we do."

Father Brown said nothing, but continued to stroke the head of the big retriever in a half-abstracted but apparently soothing fashion.

"Why," said Fiennes, warming again to his monologue, "there was a dog in the case I've come to see you about: what they call the 'Invisible Murder Case,' you know. It's a strange story, but from my point of view the dog is about the strangest thing in it. Of course, there's the mystery of the crime itself, and how old Druce can have been killed by somebody else when he was all alone in the summerhouse—"

The hand stroking the dog stopped for a moment in its rhythmic movement, and Father Brown said calmly: "Oh, it was a summerhouse, was it?"

"I thought you'd read all about it in the papers," answered Fiennes. "Stop a minute; I believe I've got a cutting that will give you all the particulars." He produced a strip of newspaper from his pocket and handed it to the priest, who began to read it, holding it close to his blinking eyes with one hand while the other continued its half-conscious caresses of the dog. It looked like the parable of a man not letting his right hand know what his left hand did.

Many mystery stories, about men murdered behind locked doors and windows, and murderers escaping without means of entrance and exit, have come true in the course of the extraordinary events at Cranston on the coast of Yorkshire, where Colonel Druce was found stabbed from behind by a dagger

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that has entirely disappeared from the scene, and apparently even from the neighborhood.

The summerhouse in which he died was indeed accessible at one entrance, the ordinary doorway which looked down the central walk of the garden, toward the house. But, by a combination of events almost to be called a coincidence, it appears that both the path and the entrance were watched during the crucial time, and there is a chain of witnesses who confirm each other. The summerhouse stands at the extreme end of the garden, where there is no exit or entrance of any kind. The central garden path is a lane between two ranks of tall delphiniums, planted so close that any stray step off the path would leave its traces; and both path and plants run right up to the very mouth of the summerhouse, so that no straying from that straight path could fail to be observed, and no other mode of entrance can be imagined.

Patrick Floyd, secretary of the murdered man, testified that he had been in a position to overlook the whole garden from the time when Colonel Druce last appeared alive in the doorway to the time when he was found dead; as he, Floyd, had been on the top of a stepladder clipping the garden hedge. Janet Druce, the dead man's daughter, confirmed this, saying that she had sat on the terrace of the house throughout that time and had seen Floyd at his work. Touching some part of the time, this is again supported by Donald Druce, her brother—who overlooked the garden—standing at his bedroom window in his dressing gown, for he had risen late. Lastly, the account is consistent with that given by Dr. Valentine, a neighbor, who called for a time to talk with Miss Druce on the terrace; and by the colonel's solicitor, Mr. Aubrey Traill, who was apparently the last to see the murdered man alive—presumably with the exception of the murderer.

All are agreed that the course of events was as follows: About half past three in the afternoon, Miss Druce went down the path to ask her father when he would like tea; but he said he did not want any and was waiting to see Traill, his lawyer, who was to be sent to him in the summerhouse. The girl then came away and met Traill coming down the path; she directed him to her father and he went in as directed. About half an hour afterwards he came out again, the colonel coming with him to the door and showing himself to all appearance in

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health and even high spirits. He had been somewhat annoyed earlier in the day by his son's irregular hours, but seemed to recover his temper in a perfectly normal fashion, and had been rather markedly genial in receiving other visitors, including two of his nephews, who came over for the day. But as these were out walking during the whole period of the tragedy, they had no evidence to give. It is said, indeed, that the colonel was not on very good terms with Dr. Valentine, but that gentleman only had a brief interview with the daughter of the house, to whom he is supposed to be paying serious attentions.

Traill, the solicitor, says he left the colonel entirely alone in the summerhouse, and this is confirmed by Floyd's bird's-eye view of the garden, which showed nobody else passing the only entrance. Ten minutes later, Miss Druce again went down the garden and had not reached the end of the path when she saw her father, who was conspicuous by his white linen coat, lying in a heap on the floor. She uttered a scream which brought others to the spot, and on entering the place they found the colonel lying dead beside his basket chair, which was also upset. Dr. Valentine, who was still in the immediate neighborhood, testified that the wound was made by some sort of stiletto, entering under the shoulderblade and piercing the heart. The police have searched the neighborhood for such a weapon, but no trace of it can be found.

"So Colonel Druce wore a white coat, did he?" said Father Brown as he put down the paper.

"Trick he learnt in the tropics," replied Fiennes, with some wonder. "He'd had some queer adventures there, by his own account; and I fancy his dislike of Valentine was connected with the doctor coming from the tropics, too. But it's all an infernal puzzle. The account there is pretty accurate; I didn't see the tragedy, in the sense of the discovery; I was out walking with the young nephews and the dog—the dog I wanted to tell you about. But I saw the stage set for it as described; the straight lane between the blue flowers right up to the dark entrance, and the lawyer going down it in his blacks and his silk hat, and the red head of the secretary showing high above the green hedge as he worked on it with his shears. Nobody could have mistaken that red head at any distance; and if people say they saw it there all the time, you may be sure they did. This redhaired secretary, Floyd, is quite a character; a

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breathless, bounding sort of fellow, always doing everybody's work as he was doing the gardener's. I think he is an American; he's certainly got the American view of life—what they call the viewpoint, bless 'em."

"What about the lawyer?" asked Father Brown.

There was a silence and then Fiennes spoke quite slowly for him. "Traill struck me as a singular man. In his fine black clothes he was almost foppish, yet you can hardly call him fashionable. For he wore a pair of long, luxuriant black whiskers such as haven't been seen since Victorian times. He had rather a fine grave face and a fine grave manner, but every now and then he seemed to remember to smile. And when he showed his white teeth he seemed to lose a little of his dignity, and there was something faintly fawning about him. It may have been only embarrassment, for he would also fidget with his cravat and his tie pin, which were at once handsome and unusual, like himself. If I could think of anybody—but what's the good, when the whole thing's impossible? Nobody knows who did it. Nobody knows how it could be done. At least there's only one exception I'd make, and that's why I really mentioned the whole thing. The dog knows."

Father Brown sighed and then said absently: "You were there as a friend of young Donald, weren't you? He didn't go on your walk with you?"

"No," replied Fiennes, smiling. "The young scoundrel had gone to bed that morning and got up that afternoon. I went with his cousins, two young officers from India, and our conversation was trivial enough. I remember the elder, whose name I think is Herbert Druce and who is an authority on horsebreeding, talked about nothing but a mare he had bought and the moral character of the man who sold her; while his brother Harry seemed to be brooding on his bad luck at Monte Carlo. I only mention it to show you, in the light of what happened on our walk, that there was nothing psychic about us. The dog was the only mystic in our company."

"What sort of a dog was he?" asked the priest.

"Same breed as that one," answered Fiennes. "That's what started me off on the story, your saying you didn't believe in believing in a dog. He's a big black retriever, named Nox, and a suggestive name, too, for I think what he did a darker mystery than the murder. You know Druce's house and garden are by the sea; we walked about a mile from it along the sands and then turned back, going the other way. We passed a rather curious rock

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called the Rock of Fortune, famous in the neighborhood because it's one of those examples of one stone barely balanced on another, so that a touch would knock it over. It is not really very high but the hanging outline of it makes it look a little wild and sinister; at least it made it look so to me, for I don't imagine my jolly young companions were afflicted with the picturesque. But it may be that I was beginning to feel an atmosphere; for just then the question arose of whether it was time to go back to tea, and even then I think I had a premonition that time counted for a good deal in the business. Neither Herbert Druce nor I had a watch, so we called out to his brother, who was some paces behind, having stopped to light his pipe under the hedge. Hence it happened that he shouted out the hour, which was twenty past four, in his big voice through the growing twilight; and somehow the loudness of it made it sound like the proclamation of something tremendous. His unconsciousness seemed to make it all the more so; but that was always the way with omens; and particular ticks of the clock were really very ominous things that afternoon. According to Dr. Valentine's testimony, poor Druce had actually died just about half past four.

"Well, they said we needn't go home for ten minutes, and we walked a little farther along the sands, doing nothing in particular—throwing stones for the dog and throwing sticks into the sea for him to swim after. But to me the twilight seemed to grow oddly oppressive, and the very shadow of the top-heavy Rock of Fortune lay on me like a load. And then the curious thing happened. Nox had just brought back Herbert's walking stick out of the sea and his brother had thrown his in also. The dog swam out again, but just about what must have been the stroke of the half hour, he stopped swimming. He came back again onto the shore and stood in front of us. Then he suddenly threw up his head and sent up a howl or wail of woe—if ever I heard one in the world.

" 'What the devil's the matter with the dog?' asked Herbert; but none of us could answer. There was a long silence after the brute's wailing and whining died away on the desolate shore; and then the silence was broken. As I live, it was broken by a faint and far-off shriek, like the shriek of a woman from beyond the hedges inland. We didn't know what it was then; but we knew afterwards. It was the cry the girl gave when she first saw the body of her father."

"You went back, I suppose," said Father Brown patiently. "What happened then?"

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"I'll tell you what happened then," said Fiennes with a grim emphasis. "When we got back into that garden, the first thing we saw was Traill, the lawyer; I can see him now with his black hat and black whiskers relieved against the perspective of the blue flowers stretching down to the summerhouse, with the sunset and the strange outline of the Rock of Fortune in the distance. His face and figure were in shadow against the sunset; but I swear the white teeth were showing in his head and he was smiling.

"The moment Nox saw that man, the dog dashed forward and stood in the middle of the path barking at him madly, murderously, volleying out curses that were almost verbal in their dreadful distinctness of hatred. And the man doubled up and fled along the path between the flowers."

Father Brown sprang to his feet with a startling impatience.

"So the dog denounced him, did he?" he cried. "The oracle of the dog condemned him. Did you see what birds were flying, and are you sure whether they were on the right hand or the left? Did you consult the augurs about the sacrifices? Surely you didn't omit to cut open the dog and examine his entrails. That is the sort of scientific test you heathen humanitarians seem to trust when you are thinking of taking away the life and honor of man."

Fiennes sat gaping for an instant before he found breath to say: "Why, what's the matter with you? What have I done now?"

A sort of anxiety came back into the priest's eyes—the anxiety of a man who has run against a post in the dark and wonders for a moment whether he has hurt it.

"I'm most awfully sorry," he said with sincere distress. "I beg your pardon for being so rude; pray forgive me."

Fiennes looked at him curiously. "I sometimes think you are more of a mystery than any of the mysteries," he said. "But anyhow, if you don't believe in the mystery of the dog, at least you can't get over the mystery of the man. You can't deny that at the very moment when the beast came back from the sea and bellowed, his master's soul was driven out of his body by the blow of some unseen power that no mortal man can trace or even imagine. And as for the lawyer—I don't go only by the dog—there are other curious details, too. He struck me as a smooth, smiling, equivocal sort of person; and one of his tricks seemed like a sort of hint. You know the doctor and the police were on the spot very quickly; Valentine was brought back when walking away from the house, and he telephoned instantly. That, with the secluded house, small

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numbers, and enclosed space, made it pretty possible to search everybody who could have been near; and everybody was thoroughly searched—for a weapon. The whole house, garden, and shore were combed for a weapon. The disappearance of the dagger is almost as crazy as the disappearance of the man."

"The disappearance of the dagger," said Father Brown, nodding. He seemed to have become suddenly attentive.

"Well," continued Fiennes, "I told you that man Traill had a trick of fidgeting with his tie and tie pin—especially his tie pin. His pin, like himself, was at once showy and old fashioned. It had one of those stones with concentric colored rings that look like an eye; and his own concentration on it got on my nerves, as if he had been a Cyclops with one eye in the middle of his body. But the pin was not only large but long; and it occurred to me that his anxiety about its adjustment was because it was even longer than it looked; as long as a stiletto in fact."

Father Brown nodded thoughtfully. "Was any other instrument ever suggested?" he said.

"There was another suggestion," answered Fiennes, "from one of the young Druces—the cousins, I mean. Neither Herbert nor Harry Druce would have struck one at first as likely to be of assistance in scientific detection; but while Herbert was really the traditional type of heavy dragoon, caring for nothing but horses and being an ornament to the Horse Guards, his younger brother Harry had been in the Indian police and knew something about such things. Indeed, in his own way he was quite clever; and I rather fancy he had been too clever; I mean he had left the police through breaking some red tape regulations and taking some sort of risk and responsibility of his own. Anyhow, he was in some sense a detective out of work, and threw himself into this business with more than the ardor of an amateur. And it was with him that I had an argument about the weapon—an argument that led to something new. It began by his countering my description of the dog barking at Traill; and he said that a dog at his worst didn't bark, but growled."

"He was quite right there," observed the priest.

"This young fellow went on to say that, if it came to that, he'd heard Nox growling at other people before then; and among others at Floyd, the secretary. I retorted that his own argument answered itself; for the crime couldn't be brought home to two or three people, and least of all to Floyd, who was as innocent as a harum-scarum

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schoolboy, and had been seen by everybody all the time perched above the garden hedge with his fan of red hair as conspicuous as a scarlet cockatoo. "I know there's difficulties anyhow," said my colleague, "but I wish you'd come with me down the garden a minute. I want to show you something I don't think anyone else has seen." This was on the very day of the discovery, and the garden was just as it had been. The stepladder was still standing by the hedge, and just under the hedge my guide stopped and disentangled something from the deep grass. It was the shears used for clipping the hedge, and on the point of one of them was a smear of blood."

There was a short silence, and then Father Brown said suddenly, "What was the lawyer there for?"

"He told us the colonel sent for him to alter his will," answered Fiennes. "And, by the way, there was another thing about the business of the will that I ought to mention. You see, the will wasn't actually signed in the summerhouse that afternoon."

"I suppose not," said Father Brown; "there would have to be two witnesses."

"The lawyer actually came down the day before and it was signed then; but he was sent for again next day because the old man had a doubt about one of the witnesses and had to be reassured."

"Who were the witnesses?" asked Father Brown.

"That's just the point," replied his informant eagerly, "the witnesses were Floyd, the secretary, and this Dr. Valentine, the foreign sort of surgeon or whatever he is; and the two had a quarrel. Now, I'm bound to say that the secretary is something of a busybody. He's one of those hot and headlong people whose warmth of temperament has unfortunately turned mostly to pugnacity and bristling suspicion; to distrusting people instead of to trusting them. That sort of redhaired red-hot fellow is always either universally credulous or universally incredulous; and sometimes both. He was not only a jack-of-all-trades, but he knew better than all tradesmen. He not only knew everything, but he warned everybody against everybody. All that must be taken into account in his suspicions about Valentine; but in that particular case there seems to have been something behind it. He said the name of Valentine was not really Valentine. He said he had seen him elsewhere known by the name of De Villon. He said it would invalidate the will; of course he was kind enough to explain to the lawyer what the law was on that point. They were both in a frightful wax."

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Father Brown laughed. "People often are when they are to witness a will," he said; "for one thing, it means that they can't have any legacy under it. But what did Dr. Valentine say? No doubt the universal secretary knew more about the doctor's name than the doctor did. But even the doctor might have some information about his own name."

Fiennes paused a moment before he replied.

"Dr. Valentine took it in a curious way. Dr. Valentine is a curious man. His appearance is rather striking but very foreign. He is young but wears a beard cut square; and his face is very pale, dreadfully pale and dreadfully serious. His eyes have a sort of ache in them, as if he ought to wear glasses, or had given himself a headache with thinking; but he is quite handsome and always very formally dressed, with a top hat and a dark coat and a little red rosette. His manner is rather cold and haughty, and he has a way of staring at you which is very disconcerting. When thus charged with having changed his name, he merely stared like a sphinx and then said with a little laugh that he supposed Americans had no names to change. At that I think the colonel also got into a fuss and said all sorts of angry things to the doctor; all the more angry because of the doctor's pretensions to a future place in his family. But I shouldn't have thought much of that but for a few words that I happened to hear later, early in the afternoon of the tragedy. I don't want to make a lot of them, for they weren't the sort of words on which one would like, in the ordinary way, to play the eavesdropper. As I was passing out towards the front gate with my two companions and the dog, I heard voices which told me that Dr. Valentine and Miss Druce had withdrawn for a moment in the shadow of the house, in an angle behind a row of flowering plants, and were talking to each other in passionate whisperings—sometimes almost like hissings; for it was something of a lovers' quarrel as well as a lovers' tryst. Nobody repeats the sort of things they said for the most part; but in an unfortunate business like this I'm bound to say that there was repeated more than once a phrase about killing somebody. In fact, the girl seemed to be begging him not to kill somebody, or saying that no provocation could justify killing anybody; which seems an unusual sort of talk to address to a gentleman who has dropped in to tea."

"Do you know," asked the priest, "whether Dr. Valentine seemed to be very angry after the scene with the secretary and the colonel—I mean about witnessing the will?"

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"By all accounts," replied the other, "he wasn't half so angry as the secretary was. It was the secretary who went away raging after witnessing the will."

"And now," said Father Brown, "what about the will itself?"

"The colonel was a very wealthy man, and his will was important. Traill wouldn't tell us the alteration at that stage, but I have since heard only this morning in fact—that most of the money was transferred from the son to the daughter. I told you that Druce was wild with my friend Donald over his dissipated hours."

"The question of motive has been rather overshadowed by the question of method," observed Father Brown thoughtfully. "At that moment, apparently, Miss Druce was the immediate gainer by the death."

"Good God! What a coldblooded way of talking," cried Fiennes, staring at him. "You don't really mean to hint that she—"

"Is she going to marry that Dr. Valentine?" asked the other.

"Some people are against it," answered his friend. "But he is liked and respected in the place and is a skilled and devoted surgeon."

"So devoted a surgeon," said Father Brown, "that he had surgical instruments with him when he went to call on the young lady at teatime. For he must have used a lancet or something, and he never seems to have gone home."

Fiennes sprang to his feet and looked at him in a heat of inquiry. "You suggest he might have used the very same lancet—"

Father Brown shook his head. "All these suggestions are fancies just now," he said. "The problem is not who did it or what did it, but how it was done. We might find many men and even many tools—pins and shears and lancets. But how did a man get into the room? How did even a pin get into it?"

He was staring reflectively at the ceiling as he spoke, but as he said the last words his eye cocked in an alert fashion as if he had suddenly seen a curious fly on the ceiling.

"Well, what would you do about it?" asked the young man. "You have a lot of experience; what would you advise now?"

"I'm afraid I'm not much use," said Father Brown with a sigh. "I can't suggest very much without having ever been near the place or the people. For the moment you can only go on with local inquiries. I gather that your friend from the Indian police is more or less in charge of your inquiry down there. I should run down and see how he is getting on. See what he's been doing in the way

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of amateur detection. There may be news already."

As his guests, the biped and the quadruped, disappeared, Father Brown took up his pen and went back to his interrupted occupation of planning a course of lectures on the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. The subject was a large one and he had to recast it more than once, so that he was somewhat similarly employed some two days later when the big black dog again came bounding into the room and sprawled all over him with enthusiasm and excitement. The master who followed the dog shared the excitement if not the enthusiasm. He had been excited in a less pleasant fashion, for his blue eyes seemed to start from his head and his eager face was even a little pale.

"You told me," he said abruptly and without preface, "to find out what Harry Druce was doing. Do you know what he's done?"

The priest did not reply, and the young man went on in jerky tones:

"I'll tell you what he's done. He's killed himself."

Father Brown's lips moved only faintly, and there was nothing practical about what he was saying—nothing that has anything to do with this story or this world.

"You give me the creeps sometimes," said Fiennes. "Did you—did you expect this?"

"I thought it possible," said Father Brown; "that was why I asked you to go and see what he was doing. I hoped you might not be too late."

"It was I who found him," said Fiennes rather huskily. "It was the ugliest and most uncanny thing I ever knew. I went down that old garden again, and I knew there was something new and unnatural about it besides the murder. The flowers still tossed about in blue masses on each side of the black entrance into the old grey summerhouse; but to me the blue flowers looked like blue devils dancing before some dark cavern of the underworld. I looked all round, everything seemed to be in its ordinary place. But the queer notion grew on me that there was something wrong with the very shape of the sky. And then I saw what it was. The Rock of Fortune always rose in the background beyond the garden hedge and against the sea. The Rock of Fortune was gone."

Father Brown had lifted his head and was listening intently.

"It was as if a mountain had walked away out of a landscape or a moon fallen from the sky; though I knew, of course, that a touch at any time would have tipped the thing over. Something possessed

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me and I rushed down that garden path like the wind and went crashing through the hedge as if it were a spider's web. It was a thin hedge really, though its undisturbed trimness had made it serve all the purposes of a wall. On the shore I found the loose rock fallen from its pedestal; and poor Harry Druce lay like a wreck underneath it. One arm was thrown round it in a sort of embrace as if he had pulled it down on himself; and on the broad brown sands beside it, in large crazy lettering, he had scrawled the words: 'The Rock of Fortune falls on the Fool.' "

"It was the colonel's will that did that," observed Father Brown. "The young man had staked everything on profiting himself by Donald's disgrace, especially when his uncle sent for him on the same day as the lawyer, and welcomed him with so much warmth. Otherwise he was done; he'd lost his police job; he was beggared at Monte Carlo. And he killed himself when he found he'd killed his kinsman for nothing."

"Here, stop a minute!" cried the staring Fiennes. "You're going too fast for me."

"Talking about the will, by the way," continued Father Brown calmly, "before I forget it, or we go on to bigger things, there was a simple explanation, I think, of all that business about the doctor's name. I rather fancy I have heard both names before somewhere. The doctor is really a French nobleman with the title of the Marquis de Villon. But he is also an ardent republican and has abandoned his title and fallen back on the forgotten family surname. 'With your Citizen Riquetti you have puzzled Europe for ten days.' "

"What is that?" asked the young man blankly.

"Never mind," said the priest. "Nine times out of ten it is a rascally thing to change one's name; but this was a piece of fine fanaticism. That's the point of his sarcasm about Americans having no names—that is, no titles. Now in England the Marquis of Hartington is never called Mr. Hartington; but in France the Marquis de Villon is called M. de Villon. So it might well look like a change of name. As for the talk about killing, I fancy that also was a point of French etiquette. The doctor was talking about challenging Floyd to a duel, and the girl was trying to dissuade him."

"Oh, I *see*," cried Fiennes slowly. "Now I understand what she meant."

"And what is that about?" asked his companion, smiling.

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"Well," said the young man, "it was something that happened to me just before I found that poor fellow's body; only the catastrophe drove it out of my head. I suppose it's hard to remember a little romantic idyll when you've just come on top of a tragedy. But as I went down the lanes leading to the colonel's old place I met his daughter walking with Dr. Valentine. She was in mourning, of course, and he always wore black as if he were going to a funeral; but I can't say that their faces were very funereal. Never have I seen two people looking in their own way more respectably radiant and cheerful. They stopped and saluted me, and then she told me they were married and living in a little house on the outskirts of the town, where the doctor was continuing his practice. This rather surprised me, because I knew that her old father's will had left her his property; and I hinted at it delicately by saying I was going along to her father's old place and had half expected to meet her there. But she only laughed and said: 'Oh, we've given up all that. My husband doesn't like heiresses.' And I discovered with some astonishment they really had insisted on restoring the property to poor Donald; so I hope he's had a healthy shock and will treat it sensibly. There was never much really the matter with him; he was very young and his father was not very wise. But it was in connection with that that she said something I didn't understand at the time; but now I'm sure it must be as you say. She said with a sort of sudden and splendid arrogance that was entirely altruistic:

" 'I hope it'll stop that redhaired fool from fussing any more about the will. Does he think my husband, who has given up a crest and a coronet as old as the crusades for his principles, would kill an old man in a summerhouse for a legacy like that?' Then she laughed again and said, 'My husband isn't killing anybody except in the way of business. Why, he didn't even ask his friends to call on the secretary.' Now, of course, I see what she meant."

"I see part of what she meant, of course," said Father Brown. "What did she mean exactly by the secretary fussing about the will?"

Fiennes smiled as he answered, "I wish you knew the secretary, Father Brown. It would be a joy to you to watch him make things hum, as he calls it. He made the house of mourning hum. He filled the funeral with all the snap and zip of the brightest sporting event. There was no holding him, after something had really happened. I've told you how he used to oversee the gardener as he did

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the garden, and how he instructed the lawyer in the law. Needless to say, he also instructed the surgeon in the practice of surgery; and as the surgeon was Dr. Valentine, you may be sure it ended in accusing him of something worse than bad surgery. The secretary got it fixed in his red head that the doctor had committed the crime, and when the police arrived, he was perfectly sublime. Need I say that he became, on the spot, the greatest of all amateur detectives? Sherlock Holmes never towered over Scotland Yard with more titanic intellectual pride and scorn than Colonel Druce's private secretary over the police investigating Colonel Druce's death. I tell you it was a joy to see him. He strode about with an abstracted air, tossing his scarlet crest of hair and giving curt impatient replies. Of course it was his demeanor during these days that made Druce's daughter so wild with him. Of course he had a theory. It's just the sort of theory a man would have in a book; and Floyd is the sort of man who ought to be in a book. He'd be better fun and less bother in a book."

"What was his theory?" asked the other.

"Oh, it was full of pep," replied Fiennes gloomily. "It would have been glorious copy if it could have held together for ten minutes longer. He said the colonel was still alive when they found him in the summerhouse, and the doctor killed him with the surgical instrument on pretense of cutting the clothes."

"I see," said the priest. "I suppose he was lying flat on his face on the mud floor as a form of siesta."

"It's wonderful what hustle will do," continued his informant. "I believe Floyd would have got his great theory into the papers at any rate, and perhaps had the doctor attested, when all these things were blown sky high as if by dynamite by the discovery of that dead body lying under the Rock of Fortune. And that's what we come back to after all. I suppose the suicide is almost a confession. But nobody will ever know the whole story."

There was a silence, and then the priest said modestly: "I rather think I know the whole story."

Fiennes stared. "But look here," he cried, "how do you come to know the whole story, or to be sure it's the true story? You've been sitting here a hundred miles away writing a sermon; do you mean to tell me you really know what happened already? If you've really come to the end, where in the world do you begin? What started you off with your own story?"

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Father Brown jumped up with a very unusual excitement and his first exclamation was like an explosion.

"The dog!" he cried. "The dog, of course! You had the whole story in your hands in the business of the dog on the beach, if you'd only noticed the dog properly."

Fiennes stared still more. "But you told me before that my feelings about the dog were all nonsense, and the dog had nothing to do with it."

"The dog had everything to do with it," said Father Brown, "as you'd have found out if you'd only treated the dog as a dog, and not as God Almighty judging the souls of men."

He paused in an embarrassed way for a moment, and then said, with a rather pathetic air of apology: "The truth is, I happen to be awfully fond of dogs. And it seemed to me that in all this lurid halo of dog superstitions nobody was really thinking about the poor dog at all. To begin with a small point, about his barking at the lawyer or growling at the secretary. You asked how I could guess things a hundred miles away; but honestly it's mostly to your credit, for you described people so well that I know the types. A man like Traill, who frowns usually and smiles suddenly, a man who fiddles with things, especially at his throat, is a nervous, easily embarrassed man. I shouldn't wonder if Floyd, the efficient secretary, is nervy and jumpy, too; those Yankee hustlers often are. Otherwise he wouldn't have cut his fingers on the shears and dropped them when he heard Janet Druce scream.

"Now, dogs hate nervous people. I don't know whether they make the dog nervous, too; or whether, being after all a brute, he is a bit of a bully; or whether his canine vanity (which is colossal) is simply offended at not being liked. But anyhow there was nothing in poor Nox protesting against those people, except that he disliked them for being afraid of him. Now, I know you're awfully clever, and nobody of sense sneers at cleverness. But I sometimes fancy, for instance, that you are too clever to understand animals. Sometimes you are too clever to understand men, especially when they act almost as simply as animals. Animals are very literal; they live in a world of truisms. Take this case: a dog barks at a man and a man runs away from a dog. Now, you do not seem to be quite simple enough to see the fact: that the dog barked because he disliked the man and the man fled because he was frightened of the dog. They had no other motives and they needed none; but you must read psychological mysteries into it and suppose the dog had supernor-

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mal vision, and was a mysterious mouthpiece of doom. You must suppose the man was running away, not from the dog but from the hangman. And yet, if you come to think of it, all this deeper psychology is exceedingly improbable. If the dog really could completely and consciously realize the murderer of his master he wouldn't stand yapping as he might at a curate at a teaparty; he's much more likely to fly at his throat. And on the other hand, do you really think a man who had hardened his heart to murder an old friend and then walk about smiling at the old friend's family, under the eyes of his old friend's daughter and postmortem doctor—do you think a man like that would be doubled up by mere remorse because a dog barked? He might feel the tragic irony of it; it might shake his soul, like any other tragic trifle. But he wouldn't rush madly the length of a garden to escape from the only witness whom he knew to be unable to talk. People have a panic like that when they are frightened, not of tragic ironies, but of teeth. The whole thing is simpler than you can understand.

"But when we come to that business by the seashore, things are much more interesting. As you stated them, they were much more puzzling. I didn't understand that tale of the dog going in and out of the water; it didn't seem to me a doggy thing to do. If Nox had been very much upset about something else, he might possibly have refused to go after the stick at all. He'd probably go off nosing in whatever direction he suspected the mischief. But when once a dog is actually chasing a thing, a stone or a stick or a rabbit, my experience is that he won't stop for anything but the most peremptory command, and not always for that. That he should turn round because his mood changed seems to me unthinkable."

"But he did turn round," insisted Fiennes, "and came back without the stick."

"He came back without the stick for the best reason in the world," replied the priest. "He came back because he couldn't find it. He whined because he couldn't find it. That's the sort of thing a dog really does whine about. A dog is a devil of a ritualist. He is as particular about the precise routine of a game as a child about the precise repetition of a fairy tale. In this case something had gone wrong with the game. He came back to complain seriously of the conduct of the stick. Never had such a thing happened before. Never had an eminent and distinguished dog been so treated by a rotten old walking stick."

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"Why, what had the walking stick done?" inquired the young man.

"It had sunk," said Father Brown.

Fiennes said nothing, but continued to stare; and it was the priest who continued:

"It had sunk because it was not really a stick, but a rod of steel with a very thin shell of cane and a sharp point. In other words, it was a sword stick. I suppose a murderer never gets rid of a bloody weapon so oddly and yet so naturally as by throwing it into the sea for a retriever."

"I begin to see what you mean," admitted Fiennes; "but even if a sword stick was used, I have no guess of how it was used."

"I had a sort of guess," said Father Brown, "right at the beginning when you said the word summerhouse. And another when you said that Druce wore a white coat. As long as everybody was looking for a short dagger, nobody thought of it; but if we admit a rather long blade like a rapier, it's not so impossible."

He was leaning back, looking at the ceiling, and began like one going back to his own first thoughts and fundamentals.

"All that discussion about detective stories like the Yellow Room, about a man found dead in sealed chambers which no one could enter, does not apply to the present case, because it is a summerhouse. When we talk of a Yellow Room, or any room, we imply walls that are really homogeneous and impenetrable. But a summerhouse is not made like that; it is often made, as it was in this case, of closely interlaced but separate boughs and strips of wood, in which there are chinks here and there. There was one of them just behind Druce's back as he sat in his chair up against the wall. But just as the room was a summerhouse, so the chair was a basket chair. That also was a lattice of loopholes. Lastly, the summerhouse was close up under the hedge; and you have just told me that it was really a thin hedge. A man standing outside it could easily see, amid a network of twigs and branches and canes, one white spot of the colonel's coat as plain as the white of a target.

"Now, you left the geography a little vague; but it was possible to put two and two together. You said the Rock of Fortune was not really high; but you also said it could be seen dominating the garden like a mountainpeak. In other words, it was very near the end of the garden, though your walk had taken you a long way round to it. Also, it isn't likely the young lady really howled so as to be heard half a mile. She gave an ordinary involuntary cry, and

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yet you heard it on the shore. And among other interesting things that you told me, may I remind you that you said Harry Druce had fallen behind to light his pipe under a hedge."

Fiennes shuddered slightly. "You mean he drew his blade there and sent it through the hedge at the white spot. But surely it was a very odd chance and a very sudden choice. Besides, he couldn't be certain the old man's money had passed to him, and as a fact it hadn't."

Father Brown's face became animated.

"You misunderstand the man's character," he said, as if he himself had known the man all his life. "A curious but not unknown type of character. If he had really *known* the money would come to him, I seriously believe he wouldn't have done it. He would have seen it as the dirty thing it was."

"Isn't that rather paradoxical?" asked the other.

"This man was a gambler," said the priest, "and a man in disgrace for having taken risks and anticipated orders. It was probably for something pretty unscrupulous, for every imperial police is more like a Russian secret police than we like to think. But he had gone beyond the line and failed. Now, the temptation of that type of man is to do a mad thing precisely because the risk will be wonderful in retrospect. He wants to say, 'Nobody but I could have seized that chance or seen that it was then or never. What a wild and wonderful guess it was, when I put all those things together: Donald in disgrace; and the lawyer being sent for; and Herbert and I sent for at the same time—and then nothing more but the way the old man grinned at me and shook hands. Anybody would say I was mad to risk it; but that is how fortunes are made, by the man mad enough to have a little foresight.' In short, it is the vanity of guessing. It is the megalomania of the gambler. The more incongruous the coincidence, the more instantaneous the decision, the more likely he is to snatch the chance. The accident, the very triviality of the white speck and the hole in the hedge intoxicated him like a vision of the world's desire. Nobody clever enough to see such a combination of accidents could be cowardly enough not to use them! That is how the devil talks to the gambler. But the devil himself would hardly have induced that unhappy man to go down in a dull, deliberate way and kill an old uncle from whom he'd always had expectations. It would be too respectable."

He paused a moment, and then went on with a certain quiet emphasis.

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"And now try to call up the scene, even as you saw it yourself. As he stood there, dizzy with his diabolical opportunity, he looked up and saw that strange outline that might have been the image of his own tottering soul, the one great crag poised perilously on the other like a pyramid on its point, and remembered that it was called the Rock of Fortune. Can you guess how such a man at such a moment would read such a signal? I think it strung him up to action and even to vigilance. He who would be a tower must not fear to be a toppling tower. Anyhow, he acted; his next difficulty was to cover his tracks. To be found with a sword stick, let alone a bloodstained sword stick, would be fatal in the search that was certain to follow. If he left it anywhere, it would be found and probably traced. Even if he threw it into the sea the action might be noticed, and thought noticeable—unless indeed he could think of some more natural way of covering the action. As you know, he did think of one, and a very good one. Being the only one of you with a watch, he told you it was not yet time to return, strolled a little farther, and started the game of throwing in sticks for the retriever. But how his eyes must have rolled darkly over all that desolate seashore before they alighted on the dog!"

Fiennes nodded, gazing thoughtfully into space. His mind seemed to have drifted back to a less practical part of the narrative.

"It's queer," he said, "that the dog really was in the story after all."

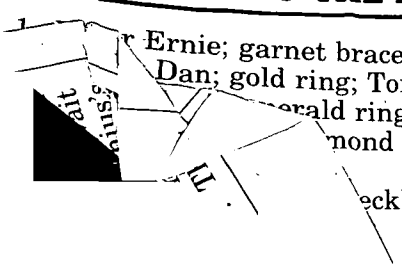
"The dog could almost have told you the story, if he could talk," said the priest. "All I complain of is that because he couldn't talk you made up his story for him, and made him talk with the tongues of men and angels. It's part of something I've noticed more and more in the modern world, appearing in all sorts of newspaper rumors and conversational catchwords; something that's arbitrary without being authoritative. People readily swallow the untested claims of this, that, or the other. It's drowning all your old rationalism and skepticism, it's coming in like a sea; and the name of it is superstition." He stood up abruptly, his face heavy with a sort of frown, and went on talking almost as if he were alone. "It's the first effect of not believing in God that you lose your common sense and can't see things as they are. Anything that anybody talks about, and says there's a good deal in it, extends itself indefinitely like a vista in a nightmare. And a dog is an omen, and a cat is a mystery, and a pig is a mascot, and a beetle is a scarab, calling up all the menagerie of polytheism from Egypt and old India; Dog

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Anubis and great green-eyed Pasht and all the holy howling Bulls of Bashan; reeling back to the bestial gods of the beginning, escaping into elephants and snakes and crocodiles; and all because you are frightened of four words: 'He was made Man.' "

The young man got up with a little embarrassment, almost as if he had overheard a soliloquy. He called to the dog and left the room with vague but breezy farewells. But he had to call the dog twice, for the dog had remained behind quite motionless for a moment, looking up steadily at Father Brown as the wolf looked at St. Francis.

SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY "UNSOLVED":



r Ernie; garnet bracelet; Vanna's Vault; Quiet Valley.
Dan; gold ring; Tommy's Tomb; Peaceful Slumber.
erald ring; Mary's Mausoleum; Resting Hills.
mond choker; Sarah's Sepulchre; Shadow
ecklace; Charlotte's Crypt, Gone 'n' For-

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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



We always talk about "escaping" into a good mystery. The phrase is never more apt than in the case of a book that has an exotic setting or an unusual milieu, or one that is set in an altogether different time period.

In the latter vein, two newcomers have joined author Lindsey Davis *(Silver Pigs)* and journeyed back to ancient Rome for inspiration. Steven Saylor's **Arms of Nemesis** (St. Martin's, $19.95) opens in 72 B.C. Gordianus, known as The Finder, is urgently summoned to a country home owned by Marcus Crassus, the richest man in Rome. Two missing slaves have been accused of killing their master, Crassus' cousin. While the spectre of the runaway slave Spartacus looms over the land, Gordianus hurries to find the real killer before the dead man's entire household of slaves is publicly executed in retribution. *Arms* is a richly detailed portrait of the domestic life of the wealthy Roman class at leisure. Gordianus makes excellent company during our stay in the country.

Roman Shadows (St. Martin's, $18.95) is a first novel by Ron Burns. While Saylor's book takes us to a popular watering hole of the very wealthy, Burns delves into the politics and power of the city itself. The narrator is Livinius, a naive young Roman senator and a devoted follower of Cicero. His story opens in 43 B.C. when Livinius is summarily dragged into the presence of young Augustus, great-nephew of the late Julius Caesar. As Livinius waits—at one point watching Augustus brutally murder his cousin in an adjoining room—he fully expects to die. Yet he must w... while Augustus reads the transcript of his manuscript. Liv... tale spans nine years in which he describes the "slide ... from the unique perspective of a truly inside obser...

Illustration by Sallie Gregory

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script cleverly becomes a series of flashbacks, telling a story filled with treachery, debauchery, and butchery as republican Rome finally succumbs to tyranny.

Paul Harding's **The Nightingale Gallery** introduces Brother Athelstan, a Dominican in one of London's poorest parishes in 1336. His bishop has given him another duty, however. He is assigned to assist Sir John Cranston, the city's coroner, a clever and fearless man frequently brought low by his fondness for spirits. The two make a surprisingly effective sleuthing team when their investigation of a string of murders leads them to the royal court itself. Harding has written a string of historical mysteries under the name P.C. Doherty. Like his previous books, *Nightingale* is surefooted and slyly plotted, and drips with period atmosphere. (Morrow, $20)

If you haven't yet read Carole Nelson Douglas's Irene Adler mysteries, you're missing out on great fun. Her latest is **Irene at Large** (Tor, $19.95). Irene Adler, of course, is "The Woman" to Sherlock Holmes. She is beautiful and a gifted singer, as well as holding the distinction of having bested the great detective (read Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia"). Douglas has Irene living incognito in Paris, happily married to a dashing and adoring barrister; they share their home with their mutual friend, young Nell Huxleigh. Nell is devoted to Irene, although her friend's flamboyant ways and high spirits often drive the more demure Nell to distraction. This time, however, it is Nell who involves the three musketeers in adventure when she is recognized by a wealthy young Englishman on a Paris street—right before he falls into her arms as a result of poison. (For Holmes fans, here's a chance to see Watson and his loving wife in their own domicile.)

Finally, William J. Palmer has turned Charles Dickens into a detective and placed young would-be novelist Wilkie Collins in the role of his chronicler. The results are **The Detective and Mr. Dickens** (Ballantine, $3.99) and its sequel, **The Highwayman and Mr. Dickens** (St. Martin's, $18.95). Both are delightfully Victorian, filled with colorful high-relief, lower-class characters and the clear-cut lines between good and evil that made Dickens' own novels so satisfying. Teamed up with the estimable Inspector Field of Scotland Yard, "The Inimitable" (as Dickens was dubbed by his contemporaries) does a creditable job of detecting. It is Wilkie's voice, however, that gives these books their charm.

For lovers of private eye novels, I have two recommendations. Stephen Greenleaf's **Blood Type** (Morrow, $20) sees the return of

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San Francisco P.I. John Marshall Tanner. Tanner is easy to be with. He is a man who knows very well his limitations, yet manages to live with them without losing his dignity or his compassion. *Blood Type* is as good as a private eye novel gets, full of people who grab your attention, a plot that unravels to a very hard and dark center, and ruminations that makes you take another look at the world around you. And blink twice, fast.

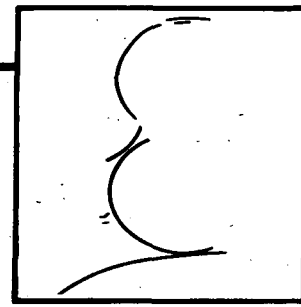
Richard Hill's **What Rough Beast?** has lots going for it. A sympathetic and iconoclastic private eye, a trip down memory lane for readers of the Baby Boom era, a budding romance, a cross-country road trip, a vengeful serial killer, an exciting wilderness operation/rescue, even a hurricane. Randall Gatsby Sierra, known as Gat, was born to a mother who loved F. Scott Fitzgerald. He has bounced around on some pretty dark roads, including drug addiction. Now he is a private investigator specializing in finding missing persons. Suddenly he gets a call from a voice he's not heard for almost twenty years. Sarah wants to hire Gat to look up her high school boyfriend Happy, who was once Gat's best friend. Hill is a strong writer with a sharp eye for characterization and a strong prose style. It will take more than one novel for his readers to be able to say that they really know Gat well. That's fine by me. (Foul Play Press, $20)

Not surprisingly, one of the characters in **A Drink of Deadly Wine** speaks well of Barbara Pym. Author Kate Charles has written a mystery very reminiscent of Pym. Set against the commonplace facade of a middle-class London church, peopled with the close community of parishioners, it is limned with the liturgy and ritual of an Anglican high church. David Middleton-Brown has been invited to spend his vacation as the houseguest of an older woman friend who works at St. Anne's. Would he come and advise them about some reconstruction they are planning on the church's crypt? David is a passionate amateur scholar of churches, and Daphne is a good friend. But it is the letter from Gabe—now Father Gabriel, rector of St. Anne's—that draws David. Gabe has received a blackmail letter, and David alone can surely guess its contents. Slowly one begins to see behind the altar screen, beyond the organ concerts and the annual fete. Too soon, David's search for a blackmailer turns to a quest for a killer. In the meantime, he must struggle with his private demons to free his own soul. This is thoughtful, mature, and mesmerizing. (Mysterious Press, $17.95)

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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



The producers of **Traces of Red** should tack Herring onto the title. There are so many misleading clues and phony leads that this murder mystery barely has time to establish one character as a suspect before the suspect on deck starts crowding into the batter's box.

James Belushi, whose best work is in comedy, is a Palm Beach homicide cop introduced as, well, a stiff. "Yeah, that's me," he narrates, apparently from the great beyond. "No wife, no kid, just one 9-millimeter bullet lodged in my chest."

"How did this happen?" you ask. "Let me take you back a few months to where it all started," Belushi answers. The story picks up from there.

In his capacity as a cop, Belushi testifies at the trial of a man charged with killing a call girl. Soon he starts getting odd, threatening poems in the mail, sealed with a lipstick-smacked kiss on the envelope. Each poem is followed by another gruesome murder.

So Belushi and his partner (Tony Goldwyn) not only have to catch the killer, but they also have to determine who the next victim might be. Unfortunately for the victims, they're not too good at that.

The victims have several things in common: they're young and pretty, they wear the same Ruby Red lipstick—the same brand—and they've all been friendly with Belushi.

Since the cop himself has a connection with the murder victims, he is a suspect. But we don't know for sure whether Belushi is a killer or simply the victim of a frameup.

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His brother, an up-and-coming politico, is also caught in the net of suspicion before it's cast on someone else and then once again dropped on him. Belushi's partner is a suspect. His partner's lovely but neglected wife is a suspect. Belushi's girlfriend (Lorraine Bracco), a successful Palm Beach golddigger and widow, is also a suspect. Even a long out-of-the-picture first grade teacher is viewed as the possible killer, and so is her son. Just about the only character in the film who doesn't get a look-see as the serial killer is the brother's elderly and invalid mother. And we can't even be sure of her.

The clues, which run rampant, include the old computer printer daisy wheel with a couple of broken letters, the color of the lipstick smeared on the victim's faces and used to seal the letters Belushi gets, and a perfume called Night Wing.

If this all sounds silly, it is. But it's also kind of fun wondering what farfetched possibility they'll come up with next.

What really ruins *Traces of Red* is not the story, which moves at a good pace, but the acting. Belushi can be charming, and he charms the ladies in this film. But dramatic acting is not his strong point. His idea of showing anger or anguish is to pound his fist on a wall or a table. For variety, he sometimes uses his open hand. Tony Goldwyn looks bewildered much of the time. Maybe he couldn't figure out why he chose to make this film. Lorraine Bracco inexplicably speaks as if she's Melanie Griffith with a thick tongue. Also, her blonde hair with black roots looks kind of weird. Her character, a former airline stewardess who marries up, loses her elderly husband, and winds up with an oceanside mansion and a fortune, is a real vamp, but Bracco doesn't work in the role. Not one of the supporting cast stands out, either.

The Palm Beach setting is nice to look at, and Belushi's apartment—a converted garage—is a real treasure. With Deco pieces and strategically placed palms behind frosted glass, it looks like a cross between an old Miami Beach hotel lobby and a 1940's *noirish* private dick's office. If more of the picture had been done in this campy style, it would have turned out better. As it is, you may be surprised by the ending of a whodunit that might have just tried too hard. Still, while there are lots of suspects tossed about, and several murders, there is no compelling character and no suspense. Belushi may be dead, as are the others, but who really cares?

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THE STORY THAT WON



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

The November Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Stuart Brynien of Brooklyn, New York. Honorable mentions go to Arthur Zirul of Fairview, New Jersey; Danna Lambert of Highlands, Texas; Rosanne Limoncelli of Brooklyn, New York; Anthony Lambert of St. Cloud, Minnesota; Rita K. Farrelly of Bronxville, New York; Stuart Brynien (for a second entry) of Brooklyn, New York; William F. Smith of Garden Grove, California; Holly Rokosh of Windber, Pennsylvania; Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Barbara Fay Mitchell of Binghamton, New York.

STOWAWAYS by Stuart Brynien

"You and your big ideas!" Ralph said. "*Now* look where we are."

"How was I supposed to know that little girl would come along before we'd finished robbin' the house?" Tommy shot back. "What were we supposed to do, let her see us?"

"But we're stuck! Look at her, sittin' by the gate, playin' with her dog! We may never get a chance to sneak out."

"Relax, willya? We found all this money and food, didn't we? Probably won't have to rob another farmhouse for days."

They waited quietly, Ralph hiding beneath the window, Tommy off in a corner counting the money.

He stopped. "What was that?"

"The wind," replied Ralph. "It's whippin' up."

Tommy joined him and looked out. The sky was turning black with huge, menacing clouds; leaves were being ripped from their trees.

"The house is shakin'!" cried Ralph.

They grabbed onto furniture, the potbellied stove, anything they could find. With an enormous roar, the wind tore the house off the ground and sent it careening into the sky.

"Scary, isn't it?" someone said.

They turned around. The little girl had slipped in behind them and was sitting on the floor with her dog.

"What's going on?" Ralph demanded hysterically.

"Don't worry," she said calmly. "It happened to us last year, too." She turned to her dog, who was wagging its tail. "Isn't it wonderful, Toto? This time, we're going to have *company!*"

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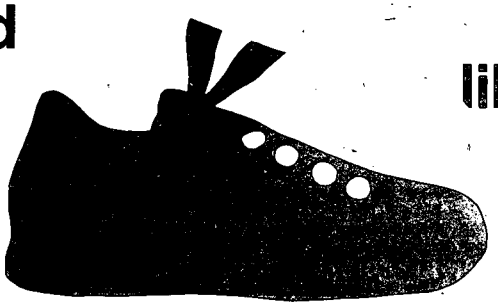
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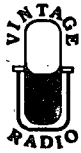
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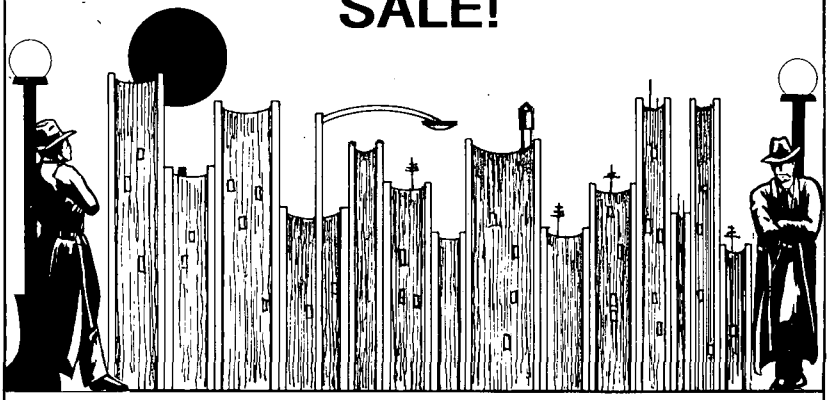
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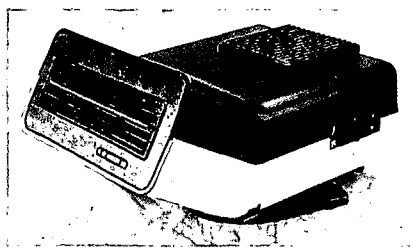
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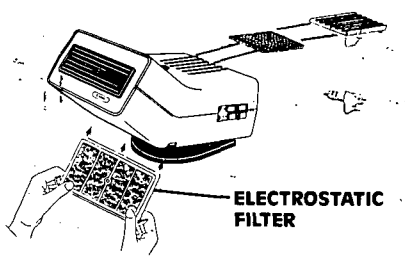
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